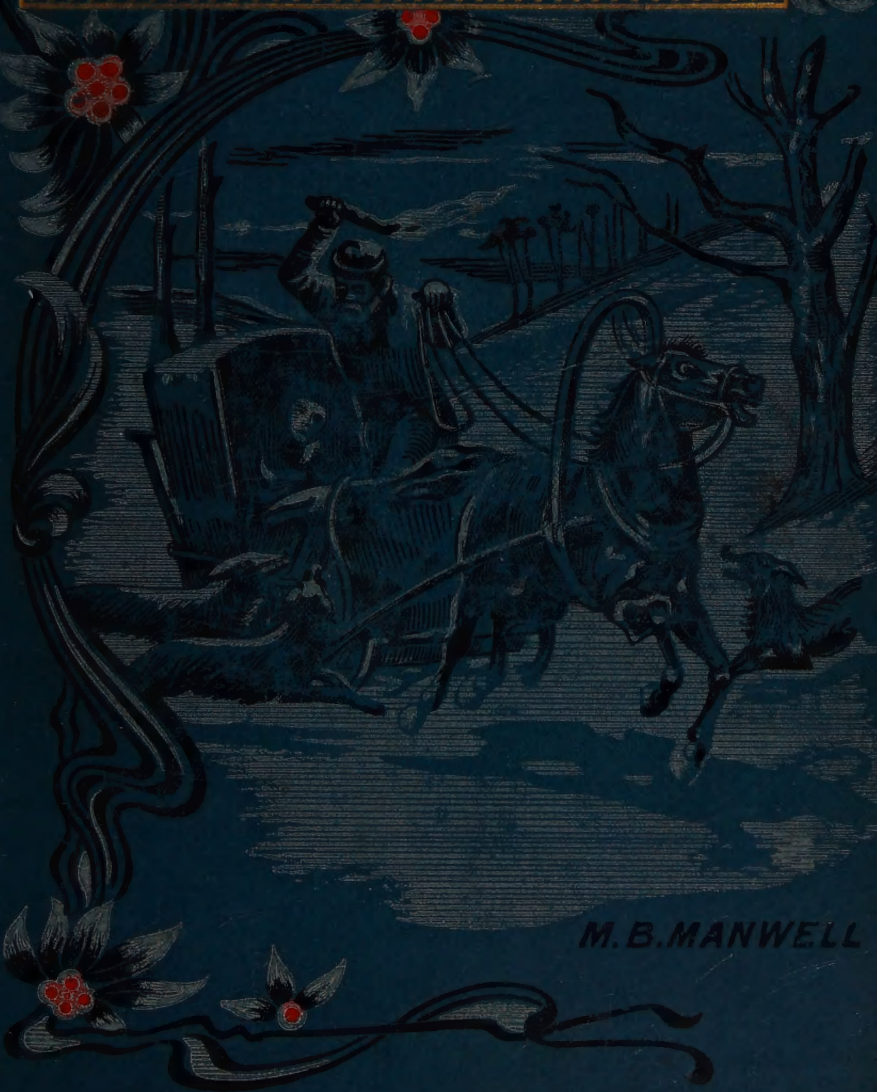


GRANNY'S GIRLS.



M. B. MANWELL



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GRANNY'S GIRLS

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““OH, DEAR, OH, DEAR! SOMETHING DREADFUL WILL CERTAINLY
HAPPEN! CAN'T SOMEBODY STOP THEM?””

GRANNY'S GIRLS

BY

M. B. MANWELL

AUTHOR OF

"THE CAPTAIN'S BUNK," "ROY'S SISTER" "LITTLE
MISS," ETC

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

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GRANNY'S GIRLS.

CHAPTER I.

NEWS FOR FRIDAY STREET.

“O H, dear! oh, dear! Something dreadful will certainly happen, Koko! They will assuredly be killed. Can't somebody stop them?”

There being no living spectator within sight, save Koko the black pug, and a few crows, each gazing wiseacre fashion out of one eye at things in general, the piteous appeals of the speaker, Miss Flora Unicume, were of no avail.

Miss Flora's life was a clockwork business; the daily round was pieced out methodically, and nothing was allowed to put it out of gear.

It being the hour for Koko's daily constitutional, she and the pug found themselves on the high road to Friday Street village, when their nerves received a rude shock.

Picking up her scanty skirt with trembling fingers, Miss Flora hastily backed into the hedge,

in order to leave the highway clear for the on-coming human avalanche, recklessly bearing down upon her.

With its swish almost drowned by two shrilly sweet, excited, young voices, a bicycle swept past the startled elderly lady and the supercilious Koko.

The rider was a boy of perhaps ten, and standing towering above him, balancing herself with her hands on his shoulders, was a tall, straight girl of sixteen or so, her handsome face flushed with gleeful triumph.

A bicycle in itself was always neither more nor less than a tempting of Providence in Miss Unicum's estimation. But a machine meant for one rider and carrying two struck terror to her timorous heart as it glided by.

"Morning, Miss Unicum!" When the boy-rider, as the bicycle swept past let go one hand to make a grab at his tweed cap to salute her, Miss Flora shut her eyes, and every scrap of her listened fearfully for the crash that she dreaded to hear.

"Good morning, Miss Unicum!" called out a second voice from above the boy's head, and Miss Flora, cautiously opening one eye, saw the navy-blue flutter of a cloth skirt, as the wheel neatly rounded the corner of the road and was lost to sight.

"Oh, Koko! Oh, my poor nerves!" she gasped.

At the sound of his own name the pug, his coat shining like black satin, peered timidly from behind Miss Unicume's skirt frills. When he found the coast was clear, Koko snapped spitefully at the universe in general. It was a perfectly safe proceeding in the surrounding loneliness, and it was comforting to his dignity as a quadruped to assert his voice of remonstrance at such biped folly as had just struck terror to his heart.

As for his mistress, both his nose and his tail curled in unison with affectionate contempt for that lady as she backed still further into the hedge, for who was to know if the reckless pair of young people would not return at a still more dangerous pace, and she might yet be crushed under the Juggernaut wheel?

It had been a black day for quiet, easy-going Friday Street village when Damer Court was opened up, and its owners came home from a long residence abroad for the sake of the ailing little heir. In ■ sense, the country village was jubilant to have the great house reopened. But that was before Friday Street became personally acquainted with young Archie Damer and his tall sister Isabel—a handsome girl, a very madcap, wilder even than her youthful brother.

Between the two they managed to keep the countryside on tenterhooks, by their hair-raising pranks and escapades.

And, yet, they were a forgivable pair, said Friday Street, between the shocks that shook the village nerves to their centres.

Little wonder that Miss Flora cowered in the hedge regardless of its prickly thorns. She was at the mercy of the reckless couple, and, with shut eyes, she waited helplessly.

And while she waited for the blow, whatsoever it might be, to fall, the little spinster's active brain pictured, with a wave of self-commiseration, the end of the impending tragedy.

"To be carried home a mere pancake, instead of a maiden lady, that's what it will be! And what the poor Boy will do, left to a lonely life, I know not, and he so feeble in regard to his socks and his shirts——"

"Why, Miss Unicume, what's the trouble? Can I be of any help?"

A new voice broke upon the disturbed scene, a cheery, self-reliant voice that inspired an instant confidence in the hearer.

The speaker, who had come striding along whistling and twirling a stick wildly round, in pure light-heartedness, was, by his garb, a young parson. Under his flat hat the face was a pleasant, earnest one, lighted up by a pair of steady blue eyes.

"Oh, Mr. Yorke, dear! I'm so truly thankful it is you! Such a shock I have had!" The

elderly maiden lady stepped out from the hedge to seize Alan Yorke's hands, and hold them convulsively. "Those Damers, you know!" she went on to explain. "Archie is riding his bicycle, and what Lord and Lady Damer are made of to allow a delicate young boy such a rough pastime, I can't think. But what's dangerously worse even, perched up behind him, standing actually on his machine, there's Isabel, her two hands on his shoulders, and they're tearing along the high road to a certain death!" she ended, wringing the parson's hands absently. "And they'll be tearing back presently!" she added irrelevantly.

"Oh, well, my dear lady, none of us can put old heads on young shoulders!"

Alan Yorke's eyes twinkled sympathetically as he mentally pictured the spectacle that had upset Miss Unicume's tranquillity.

Personally, he was too near the age of the delinquents not to appreciate the escapade in his heart; that was, from the point of view of its sheer daring.

But the elderly lady's genuine terror appealed to quite another and sterner side of his nature. For the human "feeble folk," Alan Yorke had the kindly consideration that belongs only to a truly brave man. He looked pityingly down at the trembling, old-world figure clinging to his hands.

Somehow, the smooth bands of grey hair on the puckered brow brought back the memory of his own "lost awhile" mother, and a rush of anger leaped into his blue eyes, that the poor lady should have been so upset.

"They might well call that girl 'Jezebel' instead of 'Isabel,' if you will pardon my mentioning it to you, Mr. Yorke, dear, considering your cloth," said the spinster, with trepidation.

"Oh, no apologies, please." The young man laughed outright. "I have always understood the two names to be one; that is, I believe 'Isabel' to be derived from the same root as 'Jezebel,' and why not?"

"Is that possible? Well, to be sure; see what it is to have had a college education. And, after all, when one thinks it over, it isn't likely *that person* in the Book would have the exclusive use of the name 'Jezebel,'" meditatively observed Miss Unicume, whose agitation had subsided now that a masculine element mingled with the disturbed atmosphere.

"To be sure, dear lady! Why, there were doubtless many and many simple, good little maids in Israel trotting about under the name of 'Jezebel'; only of course with us it has come to have a quite sinister sound!" Alan Yorke cheerfully rubbed his hands. His was a breezy nature, and it was a way he had to look upon the best side

of all things, thereby helping himself as well as some others over a good many stiles and weary miles of this life-tramp.

"Well, then, what's to do about those two? Would it be any use to hurry after them, Mr. Yorke, dear?" suggested Miss Unicum presently.

"Not the least!" was the young man's prompt answer. "Unless I had my own wheel; I couldn't catch them on foot. But don't distress yourself about them. They will pick themselves out of any hole; trust them, they're just the two! Why, only the other day they tore through Friday Street village with Archie sitting on the handle-bar of his sister's bicycle! Everybody fled at sight of them, and of course they quickly capsized into a ditch, but came out of it smiling cheerfully. Oh, there's no harm in them; they're only bubbling over with the joy of living, just as you see the swarms of gnats bobbing and jigging in a sun-streamer. Life's such a gloriously happy thing!" There was a sympathetic glow on the face under the clerical hat.

"Ah!" Miss Unicum contemplated that glow wistfully. It was the colour of youth, of hope, of power, while the only tint her eyes could see nowadays was dun and dreary, for her life's springs were sapped.

"Wellaway!" she said gently and quaintly, "I'm a long way in front of yourself on the road of

life, my dear! Forgive me, but I can never forget that your grandfather and I were boy and girl at the same time—he and I and my brother all three together; so ‘my dear’ trips off my tongue; and it shouldn’t, now that you are a clergyman!”

“Being ‘a clergyman’ doesn’t make any greatly perceptible difference,” a little gravely said the young man. “I’m as glad as ever when the sun shines. I can laugh—and I do—as loudly as ever. So we must hope the ‘loud laugh’ doesn’t *always* mean the ‘vacant mind.’ There’s one thing, you see: it is simply impossible that our Father in Heaven created things fair, and happy, and goodly, and then expected man to turn the cold shoulder upon His works!” ended Alan Yorke energetically.

“Dear lad!” The little spinster’s eyes were misty. “It does freshen one up to meet you, and hear you talk! Since you came to Friday Street the trees look greener and the skies bluer—to me, that is. I hope I’m not one to complain, but we’re just a bit dreary at The Bend, you know, Mr. Yorke, dear. It’s so very silent. When the Boy’s not buried in his writings, he’s sitting twirling his thumbs, composing in his dear mind. It’s a most absorbing life, a penman’s—to himself. So shut in, as it were. So few outer interests. Why, you’d hardly believe it, but when coal rose so distressingly in price, and I mentioned it, the Boy

said nothing but 'Hum, yes! The interior of the earth is shrinking, I must follow that up!' And he twirled his thumbs so fast that they fairly dazzled me. It's somewhat discouraging, of course!" Miss Unicume lapsed into plaintiveness.

"Oh, well," briskly said Alan Yorke, "there's a piece of news that will cheer you up, I expect. Friday Street is full of it, this morning. That old cottage they call 'Gardenfair' is let to Mrs. Charteris—you remember her? She and her two young granddaughters are coming down here. It must be to settle; she has taken it for a term of years, they tell me. Now, there's a piece of news!"

"You don't say so, my dear!" agitatedly said the spinster. "Gardenfair let! And to Mrs. Charteris of all people. We knew her very well, the Boy and I, in the old days. She used to be a great deal at Charteris Royal, with her brother-in-law, the late squire. Ah, dear, and if her wild soldier-son had been more biddable and steady, he would have been the squire's heir, that's very sure, for he was the only nephew. I could tell you sorrowful tales of his wildness, Mr. Yorke, dear, so could the Boy. But it's no use digging up the past; surely not. Still, it's pleasant hearing that we're to have some lightsome changes in Friday Street. Why, what a morning this has been! So many events! Those Damers now, perhaps

their young bodies may be strewing the high-road lifeless; and then here is this surprise. Things come in crowds, don't they, sometimes?"

"Mostly. In battalions, yes," assented Alan, under his breath.

"Gardenfair let! Actually! Dear, dear! Surely that's news to rouse up the Boy!" Miss Unicume prepared to carefully elevate her skirt frill from the white dust. She must hurry home now as fast as possible. "Goodbye, dear lad!"

With the flapping gait of a lapwing she scudded along the hedge, and Koko, throwing back a wrinkled sneer at the young parson, ambled in her wake.

"Dear old soul!" said Alan, cramming his hat down on his head, and striding in the opposite direction. "They are a comical couple, she and the Boy! Queer thing," he went on half aloud to the surrounding June freshness and sweetness, for the west wind was hurrying laden with perfumes from across far-off beanfields, "to think of a Boy and a Girl each seventy years, all told. They'll never grow old, those two—at least, not to each other. Perhaps—I wonder," Alan broke off to speculate vaguely if, maybe, when, by-and-by, the process of growing old had ceased altogether, a new-made world would be peopled with beings young and fresh as the morn.

"Hi! Ho! Here we are again!" A ringing

shout broke up his thoughts, and he sprang nimbly to the side as the bicycle with its two passengers came swishing back along the road.

"So I see," drily he observed, and his flat hat again came off to salute the hindmost rider.

"It's just prime!" calmly remarked Archie.

"Really and truly, Mr. Yorke, it's lovely," supplemented the girl in navy-blue.

Both passengers were on *terra firma*, and Isabel Damer's face flushed hotly at the young parson's contemplatively curious gaze.

Alan Yorke was simply regarding herself—and she felt it with a sting—as a curiosity altogether foreign to his own nature. She fiercely resented his mild stare, all the more because her better nature told her the condemnation it displayed was a just enough one.

"You should have seen the fun," she went on daringly. "We quite woke up the villagers. They were frightened into fits, very nearly."

"I don't know that I should have seen that *as* fun; I'm not sure that I should," said Alan half-seriously, half-quizzically. "I don't think it much of a pastime, that of scaring into fits the 'feeble folk,' the human conies, among us. It's a fine thing to be daring and so on, but it's a finer for the strong to make allowance for the weaker. But you won't thank me for this little preach, you two, will you? Only, if you had

seen poor Miss Unicume's agitation just now, you would have thought hard things of yourselves, both of you."

"Oh, the Girl!" scoffed Isabel. "Yes, I expect we did give her a pretty little fright."

"I say, Mr. Yorke, have you heard that jolly little box, Gardenfair, is let, and that Mrs. Charteris is going to settle there?" put in Archie, the veriest gossip going.

The boy had been forbidden the thought of public school, for the present, on account of some threatened delicacy. He had been reared so far under governesses and tutors. In consequence, his natural inquisitiveness was sharpened to the keenest edge by a narrow home-life.

"Oh, yes. I've heard. It's the news of the day," said Alan Yorke. "It will be pleasant for you," he turned politely to Isabel; "to have some girl-companions, I mean."

"Ye-es. Depends on the girls a good deal," observed Miss Damer loftily.

"I heard all about 'em. I can tell you," broke in Archie. "Old Mrs. Pierrepont was having tea with mother. I guessed she was, as her carriage waited so long. So I slipped indoors to annex a bit of plum-cake, and while I was eating it I listened, y'know. The two girls, the grand-daughters, are orphans. The Major, their father, was killed in the Sudan—he was Dick Charteris,

the old lady's only son. Their mother died long ago. They are all as poor as church mice, for the old grand-uncle, who it was hoped would leave Dick Charteris the property, was a bit cranky, and hid his will in too safe a place for anybody to find it. Oh, and I forgot. Those girls have no right by law to Charteris because the retail was broken long ago. What are you laughing at, Jess? It isn't retail? Well—oh, entail's much the same thing!

"The old grand-uncle made 'a pot of money all on his ownsome, and he bought the place. He could do whatever he liked with it. See? But he was determined that wild Dick shouldn't have a finger in the pie, though he has been known to say that Dick's little girls should have his money in the end, if he didn't leave it to the hospitals. Perhaps he has. So there it is. The will's somewhere, and all the money's a-begging. What d'you say to that?"

"Why, I say that you are a regular old gossip! You're fit to sit in the corner and twirl your thumbs, as the Boy does at the Bend Cottage. But you'd best look in the dictionary for the difference between retail and entail. I'm off, or you'll say justly that I'm another gossip of the same kind as yourself."

"He's a very good sort," observed Archie reflectively, gazing after the young parson's

striding, flying figure. "It's queer that a chap can be so fit, and so up to things—cricket, sports, and all that—and at the same time be—a—be so strict about religious things."

The boy ended stammeringly, and somewhat lamely, wishing all the time that he had held his tongue.

But Isabel was silent. She was stooping over the tyres, and if it had not been for the deepening flush on her face it might have been that she had not heard Archie's speculative remarks.

"Well, then, Jess, let us get on home, if you're ready," urged the boy.

"I think," slowly said Isabel, as she straightened herself up, "I think I'll walk back to the Court, Archie. You go on alone."

Archie whistled.

"All right," he easily rejoined, as he remounted and wheeled away. "Jess is afraid of those Charteris girls already! She doesn't want her tricks to come to their ears; that's it. But Friday Street will open their eyes to begin with," he muttered, and chuckled. Life would be a dull thing for Archie Damer if his tall sister turned over that leaf to which every finger pointed. He rather hoped, therefore, that the newcomers to Friday Street would be warned off by the reputation of Isabel as being the wildest madcap in the shires.

"Let them keep themselves to themselves, and leave Jess and me to our fun," the boy said vehemently, as he shot through the open gates of the Court. "That was cutting it rather fine!" He grinned pleasantly as his wheel grazed the tail of a hysterical hen, and then fanned the pinafore of the lodge-keeper's youngest toddler.

CHAPTER II.

ALL IN A GARDEN FAIR!

IT was just after the flaming June sunset had set the stately pine trunks in a vivid blaze, that the Friday Street fly idled, with an easy dignity, into the village, skirting the Green and drawing up creakingly in front of a creeper-smothered cottage.

The fly had been to meet the evening express at Ford Station, and, from the moment the news of its having been ordered so to do, had travelled in and out of every village home, expectation had been rampant.

There was little going and coming for Friday Street, and when the fly was commandeered the excitement was bound to go the round of the Green like wildfire. That was the best of Friday Street: all things as well as news went round, for the village itself was a kiss-in-the-ring of cottage-homes, each keeping an Argus-eye on the rest. This encircling order of things simplified life, in that curiosity was amply satisfied, with little or no trouble to any one in particular.

So, when the fly drew up at Gardenfair, the

rest of Friday Street folded its hands to look on at its ease, while the disembarking took place of its freight, human and otherwise.

"Oh, Gran! Look, Gran! This must be the house!"

The excited shriek came from one of the fly's passengers, who were all-unconscious of the spectacular entertainment they were affording to the Green.

"Of course it is! Don't you see the name fresh-painted on the gate in white letters—'Gardenfair'?" came a second exclaiming voice. "Oh, Cherrie—oh, Gran, it's going to be lovely!"

Two small-made, slenderly fashioned girls were already on the gravel path, while a third girl, primly dressed and clutching tenaciously a basket of eatables, clambered down from the box-seat.

"Now, Miss Berry, if so be you'll hold the basket steady, I'll see to getting the mistress out," staidly said the latter. "And, Miss Cherrie, jes' you run up the path and set the house door wide for we."

A dainty old lady, silver of hair and apple-faced, stepped out from the fly, and looked round her critically.

"Gran! Gran! Real honeysuckle over the porch! Ah-h!" sniffed Cherrie delightedly, as she stood in the open doorway facing the on-coming procession from the fly.

"It's sweet, very sweet!" quietly said Mrs. Charteris, and her dimmed eyes filled. There was a homelike look about the white house, with its lattice windows, its creepers, and the thatched roof that took on the tints which painters love so well.

The house was a furnished one of which the owners had grown tired; it was therefore offered to be let for a nominal rent, and a friendly lawyer had snapped at it for Mrs. Charteris and her young charges.

The old lady was promptly thankful for a home of any sort in these days of pinch and stress. Her own private income had been steadily growing smaller, and, now that her young granddaughters, Beryl and Cherril Charteris, were thrown on her hands, the effort to make ends meet was a serious one.

"God is very good!" she said softly, when she had placed herself in a chair beside the open casement.

In the silver-haired head a wonderful scheme had been hatching of late, and as she looked over her new surroundings she told herself jubilantly that Gardenfair would make her plot a successful one.

By-and-by, when Phoebe had brought some tea for her ladies, Granny felt it was the proper moment to confess her plans for the first time.

"A school, Gran, a girls' school!" Cherrie's voice was hoarse with excitement, while Berry dropped her bread and butter speechlessly.

"Well, you'd hardly call it a school, I suppose. Just six girls, four besides your two selves. I have already got the promise of three, so there's only one vacancy. But the lawyers, who managed to hear of the three, may any day find a fourth."

Gran sat up briskly. In spite of her sixty odd years, she was full of enterprise and pluck.

"Do you mean, Granny, that there will be six of us, all girls, in this house together? Who will teach us?" demanded the puzzled Beryl. "Will you, Gran?"

"No, no. I and my good Minchin will look after your creature comforts, when she comes." Minchin was the faithful maid who had clung to her mistress through the years from weal to woe. "But we must have a foreign teacher, and masters from the county-town to look after your minds, do you see?"

But Cherrie and Beryl were incapable of seeing that, or anything but the one astounding fact. Gardenfair, a girls' school, for that's what it would be, certainly, even if the number were limited to six! And the twin sisters knew absolutely nothing of other girls and other girls' ways.

In a torpor of surprise the pair sat silent, while Granny unfolded her plans to their astonished ears.

It was a wonderful scheme she had thought out. Two of the girls coming were a couple of sisters, daughters of a rich merchant who had made an instantaneous and colossal fortune. In this way, his family was launched into an unfamiliar sphere. Wisely enough the parents decided to send their girls to a private home, with a few other girls, in order to shape them. They would pay handsomely, even generously, for the privilege of having their children in the care of a gentlewoman of the standing of Mrs. Charteris. So the two Skeffington sisters were shortly to arrive at Gardenfair.

The third pupil was a little Russian orphan, Varvara Popoff, whose father having married an Englishwoman and been much in England, had left directions that his only child should be educated in a country which he honestly admired rather than his own.

"A foreigner!" gasped Cherrie. "We shan't know ■ word she says!"

"You don't know the Russians, my child," said Granny. "They are a wonderful people for languages; probably this little creature will speak English very much more correctly than you or Berry, certainly more so than poor Phœbe, who convulses one with her odd mistakes."

"And—and when is it all to begin?" asked Beryl, coming slowly out of her stupor.

"Well," Granny said, meditatively, "I fancy we shall be ready next week. Minchin comes to-morrow to take her place at the helm of affairs. Under her she will have a strong, young country-woman, and our steady little Phœbe. So much for the house-place. Then, I must drive to Ford and engage masters or mistresses to come over. That will be easy enough; in these days of bicycling, there's no difficulty in distance. Yes, yes, I see my way very clearly!" cheerfully said the brisk old lady. Whatever was her secret motive it promised well. But, long after Berry and Cherrie had scampered off to explore the precincts of the new home, Mrs. Charteris sat idly balancing her teaspoon in a brown study.

"It was taking a great risk upon my shoulders; some people might even say I have done a most reprehensible thing, and blame me harshly. But nobody could say it was a crime. And I think—I'm sure—it is going to answer. It was a wonderful venture, but the result will pay me richly, I trust. These two fair white young souls God has given into my charge must be 'purified through fire.'

"They both—Cherrie especially—have my dear boy Dick's nature. All for show and grandeur and waste. Poor Dick, he wrecked his own life, only redeeming his wild courses by his soldierly death. But these two, his girlies, it was all-imperative that they should be guarded from the great temptation

of wealth, until their natures were disciplined. It was the only way, yes, yes."

"Mistress, please!" A hoarse voice at her elbow made Mrs. Charteris turn a startled face.

It was Phoebe. The round, owl-like eyes in her stolid, white face were at their widest, and Mrs. Charteris hastily shook off her own thoughts to come to the rescue.

"'Tis the little ladies, mem! They be out and away beyont the garden gate, and out on that there waste o' green grass with a pump in its middle. Possible, they'll git drowning theirselves!"

Phoebe was a person of reticent nature, fortunately, seeing that when she did break into speech it was of the most impossible grammar as well as other grotesque mistakes.

"Dear, dear! Out on the Green! That won't do, Phoebe!"

"No, mem, 'twon't," assented Phoebe emphatically. She was city-bred, and full of conviction as to the terrors, the greater because the unknown terrors of country-life. "If so be as they felled down that well, it'd be a crowning business; we should ha' to 'dentify them to the crowner, mem!" she went on to explain more fully, with a morbid gleam of satisfaction darting into her stolid, white face.

"Phoebe, fly! Say that I command my grand-daughters to return indoors instantly."

"Yes, mem, that I will. And besides, mem, belike there's snakes and hopper-grasses all over that green."

Phœbe lingered to shoot a few more country horrors at her mistress, who broke into an irresistible laugh.

"Hopper-grasses! Oh, you ridiculous Phœbe, do you mean grass-hop——"

But Phœbe was off, out of hearing, speeding over "the waste o' grass" to do the bidding of her mistress.

It was but a little while back since Phœbe Brown stepped into the life of Mrs. Charteris out of an unlovely city slum in London's far east.

A good, earnest soul who was fighting the powers of evil with might and main, a city missionary, had fished the poor, small waif out of the muddy stream of slum life, and then looked round for a niche to place her in.

This he found with Mrs. Charteris and her faithful Minchin, who had wanted just the small help Phœbe Brown could supply in their altered, new home.

When the poor city girl got over the astonishment that every hand raised was not meant to strike her a cruel blow, or that lips opened to speak kindly words, not curses, Phœbe fell into simple raptures over the new, strange life.

And a new dignity was in her step as she marched her young ladies across the Green back to Gardenfair. She felt an inch taller.

"But we shouldn't have come for *your* orders, I can tell you, Phœbe!" mutinously said Cherrie. "It's most impertinent of you to order us about; you're nothing but a common little slavey; do you know that?"

"Yes, Miss Cherrie, I know I be," equably rejoined Phœbe, in no wise offended at Cherrie's own impertinence, and she held open the garden gate in careful imitation of Minchin's custom to her lady.

"Yes; and you're a dear little soul as well!" Cherrie, easily mollified, laughed out, but Beryl turned her pretty face in disdain from the little maid.

"I wonder, I do, why Miss Berry can't abear to look on me!" wondered Phœbe simply, as she followed the twins indoors.

CHAPTER III.

ISABEL'S PROPOSAL.

IT was a week and more later. Minchin at the helm, had the little establishment at Gardenfair in working order, already.

The little school had opened, and Friday Street was profoundly impressed over the important fact.

It was the one topic of conversation in and round the village, and at last it reached Damer Court.

"Mother! father! What *do* you think? And, oh, will you let me go, too?"

Isabel Damer rushed like a gale into the dining-room, where her parents were already seated at lunch, and at her heels tore Archie, as excited as herself.

Both talking at once they told the news of the little school opened, and Isabel clamoured to be allowed to make one of the six.

"But, my child, my dear Isabel," remonstrated Lady Damer, a good-natured, stout woman who always found it impossible to say no to either

of her children, "you know you have your own governess, poor mademoiselle. What can you possibly mean about going to this school which Mrs. Charteris has started?"

"And *you* know, mother, that 'poor mademoiselle' as you call her, never means to come back to the Court after the midsummer holiday!" retorted Isabel, but she put her arm round Lady Damer's neck and kissed her on the chin; for the young Damers were fondly attached to their parents, as were their parents to them.

"Well, if she does not, it will be entirely your fault, Isabel," almost tearfully said her mother. "The poor soul has been simply harassed out of her life by the unkind tricks you've played her."

Isabel giggled consciously, and Archie sniggered.

"Well, you see, she's only French, after all," said Isabel excusingly.

"Only French! She's only human, poor thing. I don't think your father and I can ever forget or forgive, though she, poor soul, has done so, the shocking trick you played her by sending her that mock love-letter last Valentine's Day!"

"Oh, mother darling, don't bring that up!" Isabel's face suddenly flamed, until her very eyes shone with moisture. "I really was sorry for *that!* But listen and think it over. There would be six of us, a tiny select school, and all the people from Ford to teach us; and think of Mrs. Charteris

herself, as the head! Everybody knows the Charteris family are as old as the hills, while we are only mushrooms, eh, daddy?"

Isabel left her mother's side for the chair next her father, who patted his handsome girl on the head admiringly.

Lord Damer had been an elderly man when he married, and he was over-indulgent to his young children, foolishly so.

"What is it my little daughter wants from her old father, eh?"

Isabel was not long detailing her scheme, putting its best foot foremost.

"Well, well, it has a good sound, this plan of yours; there's some sense in it, eh, my dear?" He looked across at his wife. Isabel could turn him round her little finger.

But Lady Damer, though soft, was not to be wheedled all at once. It took some time to bring her to see the advantages of school life for her harum-scarum daughter.

"I'll do this much, I'll call on Mrs. Charteris." She yielded so far, and Isabel gave her no rest until the carriage was ordered and on its way to Friday Street. The iron must be struck while hot.

"Mistress, please!" Phœbe Brown's voice was a degree hoarser than usual. "There's a carriage at our gate, with a lady in it, and two grand gentlemen on the box. One of 'em comed up to

the door, and he asked if so be Mrs. Charteris was at home, an' I said, 'Yes for sure, where would you be at home, if not in your own house?' With that, he stared, and giv' me this ticket." And she handed to Mrs. Charteris Lady Damer's card.

The two ladies had not met before, but Charteris Royal was in the same county as Damer Court and Friday Street, so they were by no means strangers, in name, to each other.

Lady Damer, a simple, homely woman, felt almost a friend before she drove away from Gardenfair. She had taken a sudden, uncontrollable fancy to the dainty, little, choice Granny who handled her girls with such apt skilfulness.

"I am so grieved for you," her ladyship had said sympathetically. "It is hard fate that you should have the care of children for the second time thrown upon you; first your own, now theirs. And the circumstances too—how dreadful to know there is a will in existence, which might possibly place those two dear girls, Beryl and Cherrie, in the position of co-heiresses of Charteris-Royal!"

Mrs. Charteris flushed a delicate pink, and her brows contracted. It was not a thing she herself would have done, to open up with a stranger's hand the family wound.

"I fancy we must, each of us, take up the tasks God appoints. He must surely know best what we are fitted for. He will show me how to deal

with my girls," she said aloud gently. "And as for the will they have all failed to find—well, after all, do you think money *is* the highest earthly good? Are there not other things that are better heritages than gold, and lands, and high station?"

Granny spoke softly, almost meekly, but with a deep-rooted conviction in her tone.

Lady Damer wriggled uneasily. To talk out openly about God, in this everyday fashion, was so peculiar, in her estimation, so unusual!

"Well, I must be moving on." She rose to depart. "And when we make up our minds about our girl, Isabel, we shall let you know at once, dear Mrs. Charteris. But you would find her a handful, so headstrong and passionate, and so sorry afterwards. She upsets my whole life with her violence; she's always at high pressure. And yet she has the warmest heart in the world!"

"A fine character, I should say, but entirely undisciplined," thoughtfully observed Mrs. Charteris.

She could see trouble ahead for herself, if this tempestuous young nature were put into her hands.

Isabel Damer would, assuredly, be the disturbing element in the atmosphere of Gardenfair. Almost, Granny would rather be without her. And yet her heart was tender to all girl-kind, even to stolid, owl-like Phœbe Brown.

CHAPTER IV.

COALS OF FIRE.

“JESS!” A voice husky with excitement startled Isabel as she sat plodding, elbow on table, over a French translation that, as she said, made her heart-sick. “I’ve got a jolly surprise for you. But you must promise not to tell mortal man, if I let you into the secret! Nobody but two—young Tom Barnes and myself—know anything about it yet, and I don’t want them to.”

Archie’s pale, small face was flushed deep-red, and his hands shook as he placed, with an exaggerated care, a box on the schoolroom table.

Springing up Isabel bent over it.

“Archie!” With a horrified shriek she lifted her head from reading the address. “Oh, they might go off!”

“No fear; that’s all right! Tom Barnes knew where to write for them, and so I sent for five shillings’ worth, and the directions are inside, I guess. I’m going to open the box.”

Archie was swelling with importance.

"No, no! Oh, you must not! I—I—don't like fireworks. I mean, I don't understand them, you see," almost quavered his sister, and Archie stared.

Was this shrinking girl the daring, reckless Isabel before whom Friday Street fled, half in terror, half in admiration?

"Well, I never!" he ejaculated. "I thought you'd have jumped at the fun. What a hen you are, after all!"

"Well, you see—if I only knew how to work them——"

Isabel was horribly ashamed already of her show of cowardice.

"We can soon find out that." Archie fumbled busily with the string of the box. "There, I told you so. Here's a book with the directions. Let's read them carefully. We'll soon know our way about then."

The two young heads were buried in the book of directions for the next hour. Over and over again they read them, committing them to heart.

"A mortar and pestle; hum!" mused Isabel. "D'you think we could get round Pamphlett and persuade her to let us have the loan of a mortar from the store-room?"

"Oh, yes, rather! I'll go now and try. I want to get the thing all in train, and we might let off a few when the pater and mother are at dinner.

Tom Barnes will help, he says. But, you see, we've got to mix up the ingredients beforehand. And it's a jolly good chance while mother is at Friday Street interviewing Mrs. Charteris."

"Yes," eagerly said Isabel, whose fears had evaporated with familiarity. She was now quivering to show off at a private rehearsal of fireworks and limelight.

Archie's birthday was in the near distance, and here would be a madly delightful way of celebrating it.

"Tell you what, I shall send for another box. We can rehearse with the materials in this one of yours until we are perfect. And we must keep it an absolute secret from everybody. Such a surprise it will be! Won't the pater stare! And, Archie, I'm going to get mother to ask the girls from Gardenfair to a little *fête*. We are to have Chinese lanterns and padella lights and all that. But this box will be our surprise. You and I, and young Tom as our assistant, will manage it."

"It will be jolly good fun."

Archie's eyes were dancing as he made off for the housekeeper's room.

Mrs. Pamphlett, the housekeeper, kept the softest corner in her large, capacious heart for the fragile, but reckless, little heir of Damer Court. Archie was simply perfect in the good lady's eyes.

"And did it want a mortar?" she said, after she had squeezed the thin little shaver in an affectionate hug.

Archie strongly objected to being located to the third person, particularly as "it," but he discreetly swallowed the indignity for his own ends.

"Now, then, old lady, you won't say no."

"Did it ever know its Pamphlett say no?" fondly said the old housekeeper, touching the bell, and ordering the mortar to be taken to the schoolroom for Master Archie's use.

An hour later there was a loud report, on the heels of a startling flash.

Shrieks of terror rang from the upper storeys, and the flying figure of the desolate young French governess was ahead of a frightened crowd.

In the schoolroom stood Isabel Damer stunned, fortunately for herself, into an immovable figure. Her wavy hair was alight, and a flame of fire was curling up the front of her cambric blouse. But the girl stood paralysed and senseless, dumb with terror.

"The good God help me to save her!" muttered mademoiselle, in a thick voice, tense with horror.

Throwing her arms round the burning girl she pressed down the little head on her own breast, and smothered out the flames with her own body.

Awakened from her trance of terror Isabel struggled, with wild shrieks, to break away. But

the Frenchwoman was the stronger of the two, and crushed Isabel to her with a grip of iron. If she relaxed her hold the fire, not she, would be the master.

"Breeng me—a what-you-call-it—a rug!" she gasped out hoarsely to the frantic Archie, who had been beating out the flames of the table-cover, which was now a heap of black ashes.

With the rug which the boy brought, mademoiselle was the victor. Rolling Isabel's head and shoulders in it, a very few seconds saw the ugly, threatening flames quenched altogether, and the frightened girl was laid on the schoolroom sofa to sob like a baby.

Over her hung mademoiselle, but the crowd of frightened servants did not notice that Claudine St. Croix's hands were wrapped up in her skirt while she sought to soothe the half-dead Isabel.

"Be tranquil then, my little!" she crooned. "All danger is past. You are safe, my little, dear fowl!"

To his dying day Archie Damer will never forget the young Frenchwoman's translation of the loudly frantic lamentations of Pamphlett, who hung mourning over her "ducky," as she called Isabel. Spasms of mad laughter doubled up the boy, even in the midst of the scene of grave peril.

The "little dear fowl"!

But Archie's laughter died abruptly into abject terror, at a loud threatening voice. His jacket

collar was seized in an iron grip, and somebody was shaking him like a rat.

"I want to know the meaning of this here villainy. Whatever's this you've bin and done to Miss Isabel? Tell out the truth, sir! I've got to see into this until my lord comes home, when I'll hand you over to him!"

It was Canham, the old Damer Court butler, dignified as a rural dean, and his rubicund face purple with rage.

"It wasn't me—it was the chemicals!" quavered Archie, shivering in his clutch.

"I knew it!" Canham looked round the household, still more the rural dean. "It's dynamite! I thought as it was. He has been trying to blow up Miss Isabel, and the house as well."

Everybody looked up at the round black hole in the ceiling through which the flames had shot, then at the blackened wreckage around.

"This is criminal; 'tis a matter for the p'leece!" said Canham, in a sepulchral voice, and Archie's knees knocked together at a sign from the old man to one of the footmen in the crowd.

"It isn't! It wasn't Archie; it was the nasty, horrid old chemicals!" Isabel nearly capsized Pamphlett as she sprang up from the sofa to defend Archie. "I was mixing them up in the mortar, and I added a little more from the red paper, and it all flew up, and oh, doesn't any one see *her*?"

She pointed frantically at mademoiselle, whose pale face was twisted with spasms of pain.

"Look at her hands, somebody! She saved me from being burnt to death, and I was the one who—who— Oh, mademoiselle, I'd like to die, I am so ashamed!"

Isabel threw herself on her knees. Nobody understood the frantic words, but Claudine St. Croix, with a frightened look of terror as to what Isabel might be going to say, pushed the two raw, red, little hands she had been hiding into Pamphlett's dress-folds as if in terror of the air.

"I souffare, but how I souffare!" she panted faintly.

"Why, she's burnt to the bone! Ma'm'selle is the only one hurt. Get a doctor at once. Now, till he comes, we'll do what we can. Flour and oil and lint. Quick!"

Pamphlett rose to the occasion, and presently, every remedy possible was on the spot.

It was many days before the helpful, ready hands were healed, and in their gratitude, Lord and Lady Damer proposed that the brave little Frenchwoman should remain on, with a doubled salary, at the Court.

But, with a frightened, hurt look in her small, wistful face, Claudine St. Croix refused steadily.

All she wanted was to get away from the memory of the cruel hoax of Valentine's Day, when

her soft, simple heart had been fooled by a tender love-letter, forged in the handwriting of one to whom she had secretly given that same heart.

So there was nothing for it but to let the brave, hurt soul go back to her own land. But only Lord Damer and herself knew what a substantial cheque the poor little governess carried with her to *La Belle France*.

Thus, it came to pass that Isabel won over her parents to agree to her joining the little circle of pupils at Gardenfair, and Mrs. Charteris opened her arms to the triumphant girl.

"You are going to be our sunshine, dear; you will flash in upon us every morning, and make the days bright for us," she said warmly, for there was something about Isabel Damer's personality, ■ winning attractiveness, quite irresistible. That is, when she herself chose.

"Yes, you mean I'm to be the day girl of Gardenfair," Isabel's bright laugh lighted her beautiful face anew.

"Isn't she just awfully pretty?" whispered Pauline Skeffington, the elder of the two sisters who had shyly stepped into the circle of pupils. Pauline was a square-built girl, with a plain face, and sensitively alive to her own lack of attractiveness. Cecy, the younger sister, was thin and small, with a certain cheap, feeble prettiness about her, and a shifting look in her eyes. She was watching

the newcomer with sidelong looks, bird-fashion, and altogether differently from Pauline's honest, straight gaze of unbounded admiration.

"Come with us and see the schoolrooms," said Cherrie eagerly. Cherrie, also, had fallen in love with Isabel's winsomeness.

Through the little square hall, with its plants and flowers here and there on floor and tables, Granny's girls, led by Cherrie, trooped, stepping out of the long back windows on to a V-shaped lawn, which ended in a group of mulberry trees.

"I thought you were going to show me the schoolrooms," said Isabel wonderingly.

"Well, so I am. Do you see those sentry-boxes—six of them—set round the lawn? Of course you do. But you wouldn't have guessed they are the schoolrooms! Now, would you? Look, there's a desk-table in each, and a chair and bookshelves, and a wooden floor. And you see that chair on rollers, that's for the lecturer or visiting mistress of the hour. He or she trundles round the sentry-boxes, or else is stationed in the middle of the lawn under that enormous Japanese umbrella shelter."

"And you call that sort of thing 'school'!" Isabel's amazement was profound.

"I call it the loveliest way of keeping school ever known. It's Granny's idea altogether. She wants us to grow up in the open air. And we have all our meals out here; those narrow tables are

brought into the middle of the lawn and spread for us. Of course this is all for dry weather. In rain, and when the winter comes, we shall use a long room that runs along the side of the house; somebody built it for a small billiard-room, they say. And in the evenings it will be our recreation hall, where we shall play and roast chestnuts. Oh, it's going to be lovely! I'm so glad you've come, Isabel—may I call you Isabel? I am Cherril Charteris, and that little image of me is Beryl, my twin. People call us Berry and Cherrie; you may, too. And these are the Skeffingtons."

Cherrie was simply in her element doing the honours. To be prominent was as the breath of her life to Cherrie Charteris.

"This one is Cecy, and this other is Pauline. She's as good as gold, aren't you, Pauline?" she went on, with a flourish.

"I'm not really 'Pauline'; I'm only Pollie—yes, I *shall* tell them, Cecy! It was only you put it into mother's head to turn Polly into Pauline, to be fine." The speaker's honest face crimsoned as she jerked out her confession to the ring of wondering girls.

When money, at a turn of Dame Fortune's wheel, came pouring in like a river to the plain, modest Skeffington home, the wondrous change of circumstances turned their heads somewhat,—the head, at least, of the mother, who was an older

edition of Cecy, feebly pretty, but perhaps stronger in character.

Mrs. Skeffington knew enough to realise she could not, at this time of day, educate herself up to her new position—it was too late.

But the girls should be “*AI*,” as she worded it to the hard-working, plodding father, who had by his industrious astuteness amassed vast wealth “beyond the dreams of avarice.”

“They shan’t be shamed and put to the blush, however, husband! Our girls couldn’t nohow hold their own, if so be as we plunged them in among lords’ daughters and such, to start with. My notion is to put them, on the quiet, with a real lady none too well off, where Pollie and Cecy would learn to feel their way about, until they get a firm footing. They’d learn to speak soft and agreeable, learn to hold their hands comfortable, which is more’n I’ll ever be able to do. ’Tis more difficult, a lot, to know what to do with your hands on a satin or a velvet lap than on plain stuff!” Mrs. Skeffington frankly shook her head over her hopeless self.

“Well,” said stolid David Skeffington, “we can’t do better than put our lassies with the poor lady the lawyers told us about. She will bring them on, but as for our Pollie and Cecy being put to the blush, I’d jest like to see the man or woman who would try it on. Why, you forget, wife, what

those two, our only two, will have in their pockets, come the time when you and I are gone," he went on grandly.

"Ah, but—well, money isn't everything! And I'd be hurt to think folk would screw their eyes up at mistakes our girls made in speaking and behaving, as I've many a time seen them do at myself. Seems to me, too, my dear, that it is not showing themselves true gentlefolk to shrug their shoulders and make wide eyes, or else screw 'em up at mistakes of grammar made by us as haven't had their advantages in education. However, that makes me the more determined that Pollie and Cecy shall learn to creep before they walk in fashionable society. So we're agreed, you and me, that they should go to this poor lady, and she will bring them on, quiet and douce, until they are fit to take their place with lords' daughters, and hold their own with such!"

Little thought the anxious mother that the newly named Pauline and pretty Cecy were to start in life, after all, in the company of what she called "lords' daughters."

And when the girls' excited letters home published the fact, Mrs. Skeffington trembled between fear and exaltation.

"You mean to say your real name is 'Pollie,' not 'Pauline'?"

There was a chorus of surprise from the girls,

after the elder Skeffington sister made her abrupt announcement, and she nodded in the affirmative.

"*I* think Pollie a very nice name, ever so much nicer than Frenchifying it into Pauline," said Isabel, gravely surveying Pauline's length and breadth of proportions. "They call me 'Jezebel,' if you please, in Friday Street village! I think they simply hate me for the frights I give them." She broke off chuckling, and smiling broadly.

"Oh, how shocking!" Beryl's pink, pretty face grew pinker in horror. Quiet and sedate, she had not quite made up her mind about Isabel Damer, whether to like or dislike the girl.

"I don't care!" daringly said Isabel. "I get my fun, and plenty of it. Nobody dares to interfere with me, so I have a very good time."

"I think there is somebody who will interfere with you, my dear." A hand was laid on Isabel's shoulders, and the girls all looked round to find Granny had come up unheard on the soft grass. "And that somebody is going to be yourself, I hope."

A flame of colour swept up Isabel's face from chin to brow, and the eyelids fell over her daring, bright eyes. Something in Mrs. Charteris, some subtle influence, never failed to bring Isabel's best uppermost, and shamed her worst.

She hated herself furiously for boasting of the bad odour she was in with the villagers, in the

hearing of this clear-eyed, dainty, soft-voiced gentlewoman.

"Oh, well," she stammered excusingly, "even father says we shall none of us ever be young again."

"That's true enough!" gently said Granny. "And, just because it's true, we others who have once been young in this world, would fain guard our human flowers in their freshness from bold, unkind, rough ways. Think, only think, Isabel, what a hurt it must be, a hurt deep down, when a man, or even a boy, sees and hears a young girl, who to them must secretly be saintlike, doing her best to be rougher and—shall I say it?—ruder, than themselves. Whatever we are, let us be womanly for their sakes, if not for our own. And, now, here comes Phœbe, my other girl, to bring out the tea-tables. And see, there's our mouse, Varvara, stealing along the path. You haven't seen Varvara yet, Isabel. Let me introduce the youngest to the eldest of my six. Varvara Popoff, the little foreign bird who has winged her way to our English nest, and Isabel Damer, to whom my girls look up as an example, if she will but lend herself, of 'the virtuous woman whose price is far above rubies!'"

CHAPTER V.

A PAIR OF PICKLES.

A QUAIN, fair girl, with a narrow face and restless, sharp, light eyes that saw more because of their lightness than they got credit for, came forward to put a mite of a hand gravely into that of Isabel.

"I am Varvara Popoff," she said, in a haunting, pathetic, little voice. Then she looked down at her black frock, and the other girls knew as well as if she had spoken the words aloud that she added silently, "and I am fatherless and motherless."

Isabel stooped her tall, slim figure impulsively, and kissed the little Russian's cheek.

"You are so beautiful and kind, all you English," plaintively said Varvara, as her light eyes summed up the stooping girl, her gaze resting finally on the long-fingered, slender hands, on one of which was a huge, Indian turquoise ring, that Isabel had wheedled off her over-indulgent father's own finger, that day.

"Nobody could help being kind to little you," said Isabel, with a good-tempered laugh.

And nothing would do but that Varvara must sit by her at the tea-table, and consent to be stuffed with bread and jam, which the small foreigner did not regard with the same flavour as an English child would have done, though too well-bred to say so.

Varvara, who talked English perfectly, told the girls how she had so lately come all the way from St. Petersburg to London with Loùscha, her nurse, who loved all things English well, because she had married the English groom at the Popoff palace. Loùscha would never have wanted to go back to St. Petersburg, chattered Varvara, quite at her ease among the strangers; she would have lived always in the big, smoky London, for love of the black-browed Englishman, Bill Bray, who was so cruel to the horses behind the back of his master, Varvara's father. But, of late, English Bill had grown cruel to his wife also, and Loùscha would too gladly return to her far-away home, if she had but the money.

"And you—shall you go back to that dreadful, fierce Russia of yours, with its ice and its snows?" asked Cherrie, on her knees beside Varvara's chair, listening eagerly to the strange talk of the tiny foreigner.

"When I grow sufficient tall, I shall go back to my home," sedately said the small Varvara, whose English, though so good, was quaint at times.

"But," and an angry flush altered the little face to a vixen's, "why say you our Russia is dreadful? Little Russia is the fairest land on earth, with shining rivers and green valleys, deep, dark pine-woods, and great plains like gardens.

"Ah, yes! And the white nights! If you English folk knew only of our 'white nights!' But, you know not even the name or its meaning. The long, long days of summer, they stretch out until to-morrow. There is no night almost, just only a whisper of dark, like a frown that comes for a moment on a sunny, kind face like that of Madame Granny!" The strange, little foreigner pointed a mite of a forefinger at the disappearing figure of Mrs. Charteris, who had left the group of girls again. "And then," she resumed, with a pathetic eagerness to speak of the home-country so dear to her, "the gipsies come and dance all through the 'white nights,' dance until they grow mad as though bitten by the Tarantula. Oh, and the gipsy music! If you cold English but heard it, it would stir even your blood, which Louscha says is like that of fishes, though she likes you well, Louscha does truly. It is so madly gay one's feet run away with one! One dances as one looks on!"

"You don't mean to say a little sprat like yourself would be allowed to sit up all night," incredulously said Isabel.

"But yes, often! In the 'white nights' only, of

course. We sit on the palace balconies, and look down upon the gipsies whirling in their gay, shining dresses. And we drink tea, for the samovar goes all day and all night in our Russia."

"What's a samovar—a tea-pot?" asked Pauline Skeffington curiously.

"An urn—a tea urn. We sip out of our tea glasses, and listen, and watch the dancers, and—and it is home!"

Varvara's voice broke suddenly. The ache that sometimes was too hard to bear came into the little heart. England, with its green freshness, was fair, but Little Russia, with its gorgeous summers, its shining rivers and pine forests, was fairer far—to Varvara Popoff, at least.

"Ah, but there is no land like it!" she half-sobbed.

"Yes, and wolves all over the place!" teased Cherrie mockingly.

"The wolves? Ah, but yes, in the winter, that is." Varvara shuddered. "Some day, I shall tell you stories about the wolves, not now in the sunshine, but when the great fires of winter burn," she promised. "But Louscha it is who can tell you the best stories. Louscha's own mother was torn from her husband's side out of the sledge, by the old green-eyed wolf that led the gang!"

"And—and—what?" Pauline Skeffington, chalky-white, stammered out the question agitatedly.

"Eaten, of course! Wasn't she?" briefly said Isabel, whose nerves were steel.

Varvara nodded her little, smooth, fair head silently.

"I want to hear about Louscha's mother now, please," Pauline had crept close up fascinated, and her voice was gruff with excitement. Horror had got uppermost in the shy girl, and her natural backwardness had disappeared in an eagerness to be thrilled by a true story.

"Yes, yes! Do, Varvara; do tell us! We want to feel creepy." There was a chorus from the rest.

After a mild stare of astonishment at their insistence, Varvara sat her small, staid self down on a three-legged milking-stool.

"I will comply," she said quaintly, and she folded her mites of hands together sedately on her lap. "It will fright you, this story," she added warningly to her audience.

"That's just what we want. Look at Pauline's eyes, they are starting in her head!" Cherrie pointed to the awkward-looking Pauline's paling face, with its terrified dark eyes.

Varvara's tiny shoulders shrugged slightly as she glanced at this sturdy English girl who allowed her fears to be so perceptible.

"This is not a 'once upon a time' story, for it is quite true, dreadfully true, you know," she began

in her formal little voice. "But long, long ago, when Louscha, my own nurse, was a small roly-poly of a baby, a few months old, her father Dimitri, who was a clever carpenter, had an offer of a great piece of work, at a long distance off; for it he was to be well paid.

"‘So, Katia,’ he said to his wife, ‘we shall all go, you and I and the babe. And the moon will be fine and full, to light us on our way, and the snow is hard. So make you ready for the journey!’”

The pathetic little voice went on, in its simple fashion, to tell the thrilling story—how Dimitri and Katia made ready for their departure, and the babe was half-smothered in wraps, for it was wintry cold.

"Many a long verst they had gone on the journey before the sun went down, a red ball behind the black masses of pines of the wild plains. But for the snow-whitened world around there would have been darkness on all sides until the great moon rose in the sky, and there were yet many versts to travel before the far-off village was reached.

"‘See, Katia, the parish-lamp is lighted for us. We are all safe now. And when we get to the little township, there will be the samovar of hot tea waiting for us. Cheer thee, wife! Is the little one snug and warm?’

"‘But yes, oh yes,’ murmured Katia happily, and she held the softly breathing morsel closer still to

her breast. How good God had been to give her such a babe!

"The next moment Dimitri's head was sharply raised, in startled fear, at a weird sound. Was it wind? He wondered silently. For the whole world he would not have uttered his first thought to Katia. Another moment passed. Then the same sound repeated, reached the good old horse's ears; back they went, and he snorted in loud affright.

"This time Dimitri heard it more distinctly, and the man's heart turned to ice, for he knew now that the sound was not wind; it was something that curdled his blood.

"Out flew the long thong of the sledge whip, lashing the shoulders of the old horse.

"'On, on for our lives, old girl,' he yelled to the plunging horse; and she stumbled forward in a panic of fear.

"The snow was hard as a stone pavement on which the sledge tore along noiselessly. And on the light wind travelled, in the rear, the sound that froze Dimitri's heart, only it was now louder and plainer and nearer.

"'What is it, Dimitri?' quavered Katia, hearing it at last, and she raised her head in alarm.

"There was no answer. And Katia needing none, hugged her babe closer.

"Dimitri laid down the whip to fumble with his left hand for a twist of pitch in the bottom of the sledge, and a box of lights.

"'Could you light it, wife?' he said. 'I must not leave go the reins!' His voice was hard and tense.

"'But there is plenty of light, surely!' Katia trembled as she struck a match in obedience. 'It is bright as day with this moon, husband!'

"'Light it! We shall need it, my heart,' briefly said Dimitri. He was shivering, but it was not from the winter cold.

"The sledge was yet many a verst from its destination, and the dread sounds were now so loud in the rear that there was no mistaking them to be from the savage throats of the four-legged terrors of Russia—the starving wolves that scent their prey for leagues and leagues.

"'Keep the torch up aloft that they may see it!' commanded Dimitri. But Katia's hand trembled so that he had to take the pitch-twist from her, and hold it in his own left hand as steadily as he could.

"'Can you see them?' The agonised question came from dry, white lips, and Katia's voice sounded thin and far off. Too well she knew the hideous peril that threatened them.

"Dimitri gave one hasty glance backward at the wide snow-carpeted plain."

"Oh—h!" a hoarse cry came from Pauline

Skeffington, who knelt crouching on the grass at the tiny Russian's knees. "And what did Dimitri see behind him?" she shrieked out.

"Pollie!" Isabel Damer made a dive at the kneeling girl, and shook her shoulders. "If you interrupt Varvara again, I'll—I'll *slap* you! Please hurry up, Varvara, it's lovely! I do wish Archie were here to hear it!"

And the childish, monotonous voice took up the thread of the thrilling narrative tranquilly.

"'Yes, I can see the fiends in the moonshine,' said Dimitri.

"'Are there many, husband?' quavered Katia, tightening her hold on the babe involuntarily.

"'There are the usual elders, the veterans in the front row—demons they are,' evaded Dimitri. He dared not tell Katia that there was a huge following of fiends close packed together and massed black against the snow. 'Tis the babe they are after—they know,' he panted out, and Katia shrieked aloud then. 'On, on!' yelled Dimitri, but there was no need to urge the frantic horse. It knew as well as the driver what a horde of hungry monsters were in the sledge's wake.

"Another spell of five minutes, and the elders of the pack, the old veterans that the others dared not venture to pass in the race, at last had gained upon the sledge. They were leaping up on each side,

F. REASON.



“AGAIN AND AGAIN LEAPED THE MONSTERS ON EITHER SIDE OF THE SLEDGE.”

their ugly red tongues lolling out, their greeny-brass eyes shining evilly in the moonshine as they panted for their prey.

"Leaning over, Dimitri—his face white as a sheet and set—forced the blazing pitch-twist into the throat of the oldest of the pack, and there was a hideous yell from the fiend as it fell back for a moment. But others took its place, leaping almost into the sledge.

"And Dimitri was right. It was not himself, nor was it Katia, the wolves wanted. Ah, but no! It was the babe—choice prey, indeed!

"With shrieks, piteous and anguished, Katia doubled herself over her warm, sleeping babe to protect it. On, on tore the good horse frantically. But little hope was left that it could ever distance the leaping fiends.

"'Tis no use, Katia!' at last sobbed Dimitri, when the pine-twist had burned low and dim, exhausted. 'The babe must go, Katia. There's no help, wife.'

"A terrible shudder ran over Katia at the hoarse, suggestive words. Again and again leaped the monsters on either side of the sledge, and the moon looked down on the howling, oncoming pack behind.

"It was quite true! The babe cradled close in Katia's arms was the prey that the wolves meant to have.

"'Wife, the child must go!' A piercing shout broke from the frantic Dimitri's lips, for the peril was now at its height."

In the group of girls crowding round little Varvara nobody spoke or stirred. They were each one frozen with horror; even Isabel Damer was dumb for the moment as they waited for the dread end from the calm, small narrator's lips.

As for Pauline, the girl was next door to swooning; she could scarcely kneel.

But Varvara went on monotonously and smoothly. The tale had lost its edge of horror for the little Russian.

"Just then a cloud passed across the moon's face, and Dimitri could feel Katia busying with the babe's warm wrappings.

"Well, with an icy shiver, he told himself that there was no help for it. Better the babe than either of themselves to leave the other bereft. But Dimitri could not look! He shut his eyes tight after a terrible lash of his whip to further urge on the horse, and the sledge tore on more madly than ever.

"When Dimitri opened his eyes again in a horror of fear, the wolves were no longer leaping on either side. They had stayed behind.

"But—but—where was Katia? Was he blind? her seat beside him was vacant. And at his feet something warm stirred. It was the babe! Safe

and warm and sleeping still, it lay saved. Katia had given her life for her babe's!

"When the frantic old horse, putting on a last spurt as its fear-laden eye saw the distant lights, dashed into the village that was its destination, the crowd that had pressed to meet it found the swooning man and the sleeping babe.

"It was many a day before Dimitri could speak out the awful tale, many a year before he could forget the tragedy."

But when the babe grew up to be Louisa, the chosen nurse of another babe, little Varvara at the palace, it was the favourite story in the "white nights" of summer and the dark days of winter alike.

So often had it been told that Varvara could repeat it like a book from first to last. But the girls of Gardenfair forgot to admire the little one's wonderful skill in story-telling. They were too thrilled with horror.

"I'm frozen to the marrow," observed Isabel, the first to recover; "as for Polly, I believe she has died of fright. Just look at her!"

Pauline was still kneeling on the grass, and her black eyes rolled round the circle of girls. The story had told most of all upon the stolid, phlegmatic girl, the last one would think to be impressed.

"Will she—that nurse of yours—ever come to see

you again?" asked Cherrie, always eager for the next thing, according to her volatile nature. She would dearly like to get hold of the Russian nurse for more stories at first hand.

"But yes! She it was who brought me here, you remember, and madame gave Loùscha leave to come again and visit me. Poor Loùscha! She is an unhappy. The Englishman is bad to her as well as to the horses. He strikes!" Varvara's face was full of horror.

"Well," uneasily said Mrs. Charteris, who had returned and had been listening, "if that be so, I'm sorry I consented to Loùscha coming again to Friday Street. The world is full of sad, bad things, that I don't want my girls to know of yet, because it is even fuller of 'whatsoever is lovely and of good report.'"

"If I had money," presently said the little Russian child, who had been silently meditating, "I should give it all to Loùscha to pay her way back to Petersburg, if she would leave the terrible English Bill. And she would go gladly, if she had the money to take her to our beloved Russia. He beats and starves—ah!" The child suddenly ground her small teeth in a wave of strange fury. There was more Russian than English blood in Varvara's veins, that was evident. The savage element would spring up in a flare at a mere touch. "I would even steal money, if I could, to give my

poor Louÿscha and set her free! It would not be sin, ah, no! How could I get money, madame, think you?" she turned plaintively to Mrs. Charteris, who stood regarding the child with a perplexed frown.

"Dear little girl, suppose you look round and see if you could find a croquet mallet for yourself, and leave the big, vexed questions to the old heads," briskly said Granny; and presently the hoops were set out, and the six pupils of Gardenfair deep in their game, even small Varvara, her gruesome story already faded in the memories of all, except the still pale Pauline.

The evenings at Gardenfair were altogether free; preparations were accomplished in the afternoons. When the clock struck five, school signs were hustled out of sight and out of mind; the world was for tea and pleasurings, nothing else.

"In the meantime, that is," said Granny, "when the long evenings come, we shall pick out an hour for work, possibly two. But that is looking ahead."

The summer days went on merrily, each of the six pupils thinking Gardenfair the loveliest of schools, and the happiest of homes.

But Granny had her hands full, and sometimes her heart also.

"What if I have done a cruel wrong to my Dick's girlies!" She wrung her hands secretly, at times of doubt. "But I did it for the best, God

knows! I feared so greatly that Dick's children would inherit his warped nature, and grow up worldly, recklessly extravagant, and arrogant. Wealth is so terrible for the weak!

"But what if God punishes me for taking things into my own hands. What if He brings down some heavy retribution upon me for having——" The speaker faltered, and glanced nervously round. Even walls have ears.

But as yet the scheme had been a passing successful one. Already Granny had noted gleams of thoughtfulness for others, of unselfish disregard of self in Cherrie, at least. The pride, however, that was inherent in both twin-sisters was still rampant enough, and needed sorely some falls as its cure.

There were moments, however, when she rued the entrance of Isabel Damer into the charmed circle, for it was almost beyond her to battle with the girl's strong personality, which dominated her companions, more especially Cherrie, and even Beryl, who was the last to fall under its glamour.

"I like Isabel best of all, Gran," finally declared the latter. Berry was a good-hearted, gentle girl, quiet and mouse-like, but all the same, as Granny knew, she worshipped show, and glitter, and grandeur, fully as much as did Cherrie, if not more.

"Yes, and so do I. She is so different from those Skeffingtons. She is like a princess beside

them. They are so common, so—well, you know, underbred, both of them,” edged in Cherrie, vigorous as usual in her likings and dislikings.

“Are the Skeffingtons common because they don’t live at the Court, and their kind, simple-hearted parents are only ‘Mr. and Mrs.,’ instead of ‘Lord and Lady’?” asked Granny quizzically. “Did you two girlies never hear of this line of a great man’s poetry,

‘Kind hearts are more than coronets,’

and do you understand its meaning?”

“Well, of course, Pauline is very good-natured,” admitted Cherrie reluctantly. She remembered rather too vividly how patiently the square-built, unlovely Pauline had sat beside her for a long, broiling summer afternoon dabbing her forehead with vinegar, the last headache she had. She also remembered how Isabel had said she detested illness and everything connected with it, and never even asked if the headache had gone.

“But Isabel is so handsome and such fun!” she said aloud, musingly.

“‘Handsome is that handsome does,’ they used to say in my young days,” observed Granny quickly.

“I do think,” went on Cherrie, still absently,—“I do believe, though, Isabel would do anything in the world. She would stick at nothing.”

“I shouldn’t like anybody to hear that said of

any one of my girls, from Isabel down to Phœbe," said Granny gravely.

"Phœbe! Why, Granny, you surely don't count *her* with us!" Berry's fair face flamed with indignation.

"Why not?" calmly inquired Granny, looking over her eye-glasses. "You can't say Phœbe is not a girl, can you, Berry dear? She is made exactly like you others, and will, I think, grow to be a sweet-faced woman in time. And she is in my household in my charge. What is she, then, but one of my girls?"

Berry was silent. She would, had she been out of Granny's clear, keen gaze, have shrugged her shoulders.

"But, Gran," Cherrie rushed into the fray hotly "it is impossible that Phœbe, a common little servant-maid, can be spoken of with Isabel—and the rest of us girls!"

"I can't see why," Granny said, with gentle obstinacy. "Certainly God has not chosen to place her in the same station with you others, but how do we know in what light our different classes look in His eyes? We are so little, so weak, so foolish, all of us," she went on half-dreamily; "and how must it sound in the listening ears of even the angels, when we talk about our individual classes? I wonder—I wonder!"

"Granny, don't! Come back!" hastily said

Berry, as if she dreaded to see her grandmother float away into the beyond, and stay there.

"Yes, yes," Granny shook herself. "But my girlies see what I mean, don't they?" she said earnestly, as she looked into the young faces that were so wondrously like the face of her boy, her wild, unmanageable Dick, who had been the one trouble of her life, but the core of her heart. Would she be able to save these two from following in his footsteps?

The one desire of her heart was to see them grow to be womanly women, each adorned with "the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit." To achieve that aim Granny had done much, perhaps too much in the past; she was ready to do more in the future. Sometimes she half-dreaded that which she had done; perhaps she had been over-presumptuous in her desire to shape things.

And yet—and yet—she was ready to give years of her life, if needs be, to see these young things safely treading the "narrow way."

"I think, Gran, I *could* see what you mean, if I'd let myself," said Cherrie candidly. "But I don't really want to," she added still more frankly.

But Berry set her little face like a flint. Most distinctly she would not see any equality whatever between poor, unknown, common Phoebe Brown from nobody—nobody but God—knew where, and her dainty, eggshell-china self.

Granny looked sadly from one to the other. As yet her plan of shaping the two had made but little way. Berry, though gentle and docile, was as vain and self-conscious, as proud and contemptuous of inferiors as any little girl could well be.

While, as for Cherrie, the one serious difficulty about her was that she was so prone to take her colour from her present company. How could it be at all possible that her surroundings should be always so arranged as to act upon her character for good? For the moment Isabel Damer was her model, and already Friday Street held up its hands over the wild surprises of the pair of madcaps.

"The truth is, ma'am, they worsen each other, our Miss Cherrie and that Miss Damer!" tearfully said Minchin, the starched pink of propriety who had been maid to Mrs. Charteris from her wedding-day.

Minchin was brushing her lady's grey hair, and Mrs. Charteris was brooding over the failure of her talk that evening with Berry and Cherry. The old house was still and quiet, for the little sleepers were peacefully dreaming in their lavender-scented nests under the thatched roof.

"'Twas only yesterday—though I heard nothing of it until to-day—that those two got themselves into a scrape.

"You remember, ma'am, you invited Miss Damer to stay to tea on the lawn yesterday after lessons?

When tea was over she and Miss Cherrie slipped away and across the Green to the river. They actually took off their shoes and stockings—and you know who put that in our Miss Cherrie's head—then they waded up stream for nigh a mile, and that Miss Damer, she's sixteen, and tall at that! Well, if so be as 'twas judgment on them, they came sudden-like on a gentleman quietly fishing from the bank. And who should it be but that nice young clergyman, the curate in charge of Friday Street parish!

"Our Miss Cherrie, poor lamb, was that frightened at sight of him that she slipped and fell face forward into the water, and her shoes and stockings were tied round her neck. Young Mr. Yorke, it seems, rushed into the water and got her out, but they could not dry her. And they couldn't get her shoes and stockings on, being so wet. And to think I should live to tell it of Master Dick's daughter, ma'am, but she must needs walk home the whole way; indeed, the gentleman, he made her run and cross the Green barefoot in the face of all Friday Street! And that Miss Damer kept her company barefooted, for the fun of it, though her own shoes and stockings were quite dry. Disgraceful, I call it!" Minchin stopped, breathless.

"Dear, dear!" Granny lifted a distressed face. "I thought I was making way, but it is going to be a task beyond me, I fear. Those two are so

headstrong, they carry one off one's feet. Cherrie is most unmanageable—most insubordinate!"

"Oh, well, ma'am, as to that," Minchin veered round to Cherrie's side instantly. It was all very well that she should find grave fault with the girl, but nobody else must do so—"as to that, a better, truer child doesn't breathe than our Miss Cherrie. I'd take her word about anything sooner than any other person living. But she's led so easy, that's it—led away by good or evil, 'tis all the same to her. However, there's nothing sly or scheming in her nature, nor in Miss Berry's, no more than there was in Master Dick, the Major, and that's what I couldn't say about some other of the young ladies under this roof."

There was a world of meaning in Minchin's last words, and she looked disappointed when her lady, weary and harassed, dismissed her for the night.

"Well, anyway," the faithful old soul sniffed indignantly, as she locked up the house, "I mean to keep *my* eyes open. Girls are 'kittle cattle,' as the Scotch folk say, to manage, but my name's not Matilda Minchin if I'm not even with some as are under this roof!"

Thus the new element in Friday Street was settling down, and the village grew to forget its newness. Surely the little school of Gardenfair had always been among them, so well did it fit in with the scheme of things so far as they could see.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOY AND THE GIRL.

IT was a summer day just before the looming holidays, and Miss Unicume was in a bustle.

The Bend Cottage was not on the Green; it was close by the river, just where it took a bend that carried it north of Friday Street. That the Bend, a delightful home in the year's summer, was dismally damp in its winter was a geographical fact. The drip of the rains and the veil of fog would have quenched the brightness of most folk when autumn and winter shadowed the land.

But as far back as Friday Street's memory could stretch there had been Unicumes, an old stock of minor gentlefolk, at The Bend. The years had gathered much moss that was priceless in the quaint, old home. Its china, its costly prints, and its valuable tomes, would have made the mouth of a fine-art dealer water. There was an old world atmosphere in its dark rooms with their mysterious shadows, their ceilings with beams, their blackened oak panellings.

It was an ideal home for the penman. For Miss Flora, well, she had known no other, therefore it was perfect. Her own youth was laid by in lavender under its dark roof. Her past had been lived at The Bend, and from its portals she hoped to step out into the "Land that is very far off," say some.

And possibly, because they had been born under its roof, the damp and mildew never affected the Boy and the Girl who had travelled life's road to a good old age.

"Two-and-seventy mile-stones on that road have we passed, the Boy and myself!" jubilantly Miss Flora was declaring as she fussed about the little lawn. "And not a bit tired are we. Some folk grow weary and heart-heavy as the years gather, but not the Boy or I! It's perhaps dull at times in the silent house, I must be candid about that; but then I know what is due to the literary mind, and the Boy must be studied. 'Tis a wonderful profession his—none greater. How they do it passes me! If the executioner were behind me, with his axe ready to decapitate me, I solemnly assure you I could not write even a book for children!" The little lady bridled.

"My dear lady, nor could anybody under such circumstances," laughed Alan Yorke, to whom the declaration was made in all earnestness. "Even

Mr. Unicume, old practised hand as he is, would feel a queer sensation creeping up his spine, I take it, if a functionary of that gloomy sort were at his back, axe in hand."

"Oh, dear me, yes! I quite see it!" Then, Miss Flora, with the mental agility of her sex, fled to a quite other subject without so much as bridging over the gap, and she sat down on the garden-seat beside Alan.

"Now, there's that young creature, Isabel Damer, I should like your candid opinion, Mr. Yorke, dear; do you think she is improving under the wing of that sweet woman, Mrs. Charteris?"

The young curate turned a startled face to his questioner, and his steady blue eyes widened slightly.

"I'm afraid, Miss Flora, I—I'm not competent to pass any sort of opinion on such curiously incomprehensible creatures as girls," he stammered. Then, he added hurriedly, with an air of visible relief, "Here comes Mr. Unicume himself. This is an unexpected honour"; and the young man sprang up from the garden-chair on the little lawn that sloped down to the lazy river that idled by Friday Street as if unwilling to leave the village behind.

A little cocked hat of a note had bidden him formally to tea at The Bend Cottage that afternoon. But, man-like, on arriving he had not

observed the elaborate preparations of teacups, and sweet cakes, and strawberries that meant other company than himself for his hostess.

The fact was the Girl and the Boy had decided to give an afternoon tea-party in honour of the young damsels of Gardenfair and the old friend, Mrs. Charteris, whom they had known in the palmy days when Charteris-Royal kept open house.

It was an ideal summer day, and the world looked its best, all sweet scents of flowers and rippling sounds of water and wind-whisperings among the trees.

"Just as if it had been made on purpose." And Miss Flora simpered as though the fair weather were a personal compliment to herself on the occasion of her open-air party. "Brother, dear," she went on, "this is young Mr. Yorke. You remember his parents long ago? Yes, yes, you do. The rural dean, his father, you know. And now the dear lad is our curate-in-charge of Friday Street. Wonderful how time goes on!" Every time Alan visited The Bend the same formula was repeated.

The Boy with the rapt, absent air of having been dragged forcibly from some absorbing occupation, stumbled forward in the blinding sunlight, to grasp the curate's hand.

Under a black skull-cap his scanty white hair straggled over a rugged, earnest face, etched all over

with the lines of deep thought. His bent, narrow-chested figure was garbed in a dark red dressing-gown girdled round by a huge red rope, and his feet shuffled in wide yellow shoes, just as he had torn himself from his pen-work.

"The supremacy of mind over matter, y' know," Miss Flora was accustomed to whisper under her breath, in excuse for the Boy's uncivilised appearance in society.

"I seem to remember your father, young sir," the Boy invariably said in a strangely soft, hushed voice, and his hollow eyes peered wistfully into the ruddy-brown face with its candid pleasantness. Perhaps a gleam of regret for the costly price he had paid for his own store of knowledge about the deep things of this world flashed across his heavy-laden mind. It seemed so good in the gay summer weather to be young and irresponsible; just as the birds,

The smallë fowlë making melodie,

as old Chaucer hath it, and the bees seemed to be, and yet were not. Perhaps, even to be ignorant was the better part, who could say? Not the Boy himself, whose brain was crammed as full of earth-lore as an egg is full of meat, who was weighed down with his burden of learning. Not the Boy, who had forgotten the way to be glad in the light of the sun, the flutter of leaves, and the joy of living.

Before Alan could answer the old scientist's greeting, there fell on the ear a ripple of chatter and sweet laughter, a patter of feet on the gravel path, and a rustle of feminine skirts.

The girl-guests from Gardenfair had arrived, and a sudden ruddy flush dyed Alan Yorke's cheek as he listened and understood.

Headed by Isabel, the troop of damsels, hushing their voices suddenly at the sight of the Boy and the young curate, came across the lawn, little Varvara, with a harassed, anxious look in her face bringing up the rear, holding Minchin's hand tightly. Something was evidently on the childish mind; hers was the only clouded face amongst the young guests.

"You don't look happy, little one," said Miss Flora, stooping to pat the fair, smooth head.

"'Tis only that she's been saying good-bye to her Russian nurse, who came down from London to see her to-day, and has just left," explained Minchin, looking particularly indignant. "If I may make the remark, ma'am," she said, in an undertone, as Varvara rather unwillingly moved away in order to make the Boy's acquaintance, "I don't hold with foreigners at all. The nurse, I mean, not Miss Varvara, who has some English blood in her veins, thank the Lord! There's a shiftiness and a depth of cunning we can't compass in 'em. 'Tisn't to be expected such as we could,

ma'am!" Minchin bridled over her own superior nationality.

"'Tis greatly to your credit
You were born an Englishman,"

Cherrie hummed aloud; and she danced gaily round, to the secret scandal of the starched Minchin, who had come to the party as proxy for her mistress.

But it was not Cherrie's first visit to The Bend, and she was quite at home with even the Boy.

"Such spirits! Dear, dear, it's wonderful to be young!" Miss Flora's attention wandered at once from Minchin's wholesale depreciation of foreigners to the pretty girlish figure whirling on the lawn.

Cherrie delightedly danced on, her sailor-hat falling off, and her long wisp of fair hair flying round her head. There was not a scrap of self-consciousness about the girl, therefore no shyness; she was simply natural. Her companions looked on eager to join, but, weighed back by the overweening sense of self, they dared not venture.

Isabel Damer, for some reason she could not explain to herself, and which lashed her to anger, was always at what she herself considered her worst in Alan Yorke's presence. She sat back, prim and quiet, in one of the wicker-chairs, devotedly wishing the young man would depart and relieve her of the irksome chain of his presence.

But Alan, though he instinctively felt her impatience, had no intention of being hinted off the premises, and presently he was Miss Flora's right hand in dispensing tea and cake and strawberries.

"Tea, sir?" He brought over a cup to the weary old master of The Bend, who sat absently stroking little Varvara's smooth head, for the child had of her own accord taken shelter with the old man who would soon himself be a child over again. On the turf beside his chair she was seated, a little anxious frown puckering her brow. Perhaps her thoughts were following the departed Lou scha on her way back to cruel English Bill, the husband who struck her.

"The little one first." The Boy waved the cup to Varvara.

"I like not your English tea," she spoke up promptly. "In my Russia we spoil not our tea with your sugar and your milk. All day long the samovar is never empty, and we drink it out of glasses with lemon slices. Not so!" A tiny finger was pointed scornfully at the cup of creamed tea.

"Well, sir, you see you must e'en take it," laughed Alan, good-humouredly.

"Then you will ask the Girl for a plate of strawberries for this little lady," said the Boy, with unusual alertness. The tiny alien interested him.

"Have some sugar first, sir, then I'll get her the strawberries," suggested the curate.

"Permit me." The Boy stooping forward, lifted Varvara's little pink thumb and finger to use them as sugar-tongs.

A happy flush and a glint of laughter chased the vexed frown from the foreigner's face at this little bit of comedy.

"Between you and me and the wall," apologised the Boy, smiling also.

"Then, I'm the wall, I suppose?" asked Alan, arranging himself conspicuously between the old child and the young one and the rest of the party on the lawn.

Isabel Damer looked and listened, wishing she might join in the pretty fun. But somehow a stupefying sense of awkwardness weighed her down, and she was motionless in her chair.

For the first time she wished she could be nice as well as natural. To be natural was her creed; but her mistake was that she was boisterous, and a dim sense that it was so humiliated her.

Her beautiful face burned hotly as she suddenly thought of the many tricks and practical jokes she had played upon these very people, her host and hostess, tricks which she, with Archie, had thought so clever, so witty.

"You don't seem to care for our English fare, either." A voice at her elbow startled Isabel, and Alan Yorke gravely picked up her untouched tea, which she had set on the grass. "I'm going to

bring you some strawberries and cream, for presently there's to be a game of *Hide-and-Seek* in the shrubberies, and you'd better fortify yourself for it."

His earnest blue eyes made Isabel more discontented, even guilty. Here was somebody, no old fogey, but one full of youth, joyous, and springy as herself; and yet he managed to get his fun out of life without hurting others in their feelings or otherwise, in the way she and Archie mistakenly did, glorying therein.

The curious thing was that neither she nor Archie could ever impress Alan Yorke with a sense of their superiority over their fellows. His very glance, amazed and curious, had the power of taking the wind out of her sails; before it, Isabel felt flat and limp; her practical jokes became suddenly stale.

The fact was, the reckless girl had in this stranger met a master who could not or would not applaud and admire her wild escapades, simply because she happened to be Isabel Damer, of Damer Court. In Alan Yorke's estimation the very fact of her position should perforce have made her "be pitiful, be courteous" to others whom she considered not quite her equals. Well-born himself, he could not understand a nature that scorned any one or anything created by God, the Father of all.

During the year he had been in Friday Street, he and Isabel had come much in contact both at the Court and in the village, and there was no

doubt she was a thorn in his side by reason of her reckless pranks.

In truth, she had sharpened her tools on himself. There had been a pitiful trick played in his name upon the friendless young French governess at the Court last Valentine's Day by Isabel and Archie. The outburst of indignation it had raised was hushed up, but Isabel could never shut out from her memory the scene between Lord Damer and herself and Archie, when the story was carried him. Her own wild repentance was genuine enough, but the episode, never to be forgotten, had in truth helped to decide her parents to put her under the judicious training of Mrs. Charteris.

And yet, in spite of everything, there was against their will an under-current attraction between the two, known only to themselves. Isabel secretly would fain have stood miles higher in the eyes of one who could be steadfast and earnest, as well as cheery and lightsome.

And Alan Yorke secretly yearned to place the beautiful, winsome girl on a pedestal. But his genuine interest in Isabel opened his eyes to her faults, which none could see more plainly than he.

"She would be just splendid, if only—but nothing save the grace of God will ever make Isabel Damer the beautiful human character that she ought to be. Her heart is as sweet as a nut,

and she might grow to be 'a perfect woman, nobly planned,' if she were not led away by her reckless desire to show off. She delights in hiding away her own really sweet nature and playing the part of a wild hoyden."

"You're really too kind to take all this trouble for me. I could easily have got some strawberries for myself," curtly said Isabel, when Alan crossed the grass with the plate of strawberries for her and she had taken them ungraciously from him.

"I was only kind to myself; it is a pleasure to serve you," quietly said the young man, and the girl's face darkened with a slight frown. She was not quite sure if Alan were not laughing at her—taking her off as she would have delighted in taking off others. And none are so suspicious as your confirmed practical jokers.

Isabel was still more uneasy when the young curate seated himself in a neighbouring wicker-chair.

"It looks so funny to see a man drinking tea, I always think. Father never touches it," she said pertly, glancing at the cup of tea Alan was balancing on his knee.

"Yes? It's a matter of taste, is it not? At least, I fancy so," observed Alan tranquilly; but he did not explain that the cup of tea he was carefully guarding was Isabel's own, which she might possibly want when her strawberries were finished.

"It was very good and thoughtful of you, Miss Damer, to take that batch of picture-papers to old Job Linsey," went on the young man, determined on ignoring Isabel's pettish uneasiness. "The old chap will find them a perfect gold-mine, for, you see, though he never learned to read, he can read the pictures fast enough. It was very tactful of you, for it must be a terrible thing not to be able to read."

"I call it a jolly good thing, now, not to be able to read. And I told Job so when he was whimpering about it," flippantly answered Isabel. "Just think what a lot of wearisome nonsense one escapes. I simply hate books," she added, with a defiant air.

Alan looked at her comprehensively for a second or two, and the colour in the handsome young face deepened.

"I suppose you find the book of nature a volume that never palls? But you forget to such as old Job and his wife Molly, nature itself is a shut book, just because they can't read. Life has no meaning to them, and their minds grope in the dark of ignorance."

Isabel put down her spoon, and giggled suddenly.

"Ignorance, yes!" Her suspicious ill-humour vanished abruptly, and Alan was startled at the transfiguration of the beautiful girlish face. "Oh, what do you think old Molly said to father at the election here, last year?"

"'Hope your husband means to vote for the right cause, Molly?' said father.

"'Deed, an' I don't know, my lord,' said Molly. 'Tis a Preservative he'd be one day, and the next day he'd be the t'other thing—a Unionist. And sez I to he, I sez, where's the since of see-sawin', when 'tis certain sure, Job, that you an' me be bound to end our days i' the union? Can't ye see, I sez, that 'tis the Unionist gent you've got to support, when he stoops to ax ye.' Wasn't that too lovely?"

Alan Yorke laughed outright.

"It's awfully funny, certainly. But it just bears out what I say—the groping in the dark for life's meanings. It is pathetic enough," he said.

"Well, but," Isabel was off her guard and spoke eagerly, "what sort of a world would this be if everybody were educated, and clever, and equal?"

"It wouldn't be this world; it would be the next one, I suppose," said Alan soberly. "You forget we must always have the poor with us, if only for the sake of our getting out of our own selfishness in order that we may 'minister to their necessities.' You see that?" He looked at Isabel inquiringly.

"You're just like Mrs. Charteris," said Isabel shortly, her worse self coming uppermost again. "Mrs. Charteris fusses more over that London waif, Phoebe Brown, than any one of us, because she is poor and madly ignorant. Talk about ignorance,

I'll tell you a thing to make you die laughing, Mr. Yorke, about Phœbe Brown.

"You must know that Minchin, Mrs. Charteris' maid, is coaching Phœbe, but it's uphill work, I tell you. Now, there's answering the door and that. Minchin carefully taught Phœbe that a visitor must be shown into the drawing-room. The other morning, one of our footmen was sent down with a verbal message, and Phœbe marched him into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Charteris found him as hot and uncomfortable as man could be. Minchin scolded finely, and explained again. A few days later, my father came down to have a word or two about me, I suppose.

" 'Please, 'm, Lord Damer to see you !' Phœbe's head shot into the dining-room to say.

" 'Coming, Phœbe !' said Mrs. Charteris. 'Where's his lordship—in the drawing-room ?'

" 'No, 'm, please ! His lordship's on the mat !' There was another storm from Minchin, and at last Phœbe, sobbing and promising, was supposed to be perfected in the art of showing any *gentleman* or *lady* into the drawing-room.

"But this very morning she came out to the lawn to announce, with proud importance, there was a lady in the drawing-room.

"Mrs. Charteris hurried in, and found a stout, dusty tramp, with a poor dirty baby and a sheaf of boot-laces, seated in her dainty little drawing-room !"

Isabel threw herself back in her wicker-chair and shrieked with delighted laughter.

"Poor, little, troubled soul, what a rocky road life must seem for her stumbling feet! But she will come out at the other end of the tunnel of her ignorance—out into the sunlight; you'll see! She has an anxious, earnest face; I noticed her at the Sunday school."

"I think Mrs. Charteris spoils Phœbe; Cherrie and Berry agree with me. You see, you never know where you are with creatures of that sort; you never can quite trust them," Isabel said loftily.

"I'd rather trust them and be deceived than never give them the chance of proving themselves loyal," said Alan, under his breath.

"Well, I shouldn't! And Mrs. Charteris will live to find her wholesale trust in Phœbe Brown betrayed; I'm very sure of that. But—oh, I do believe that is Archie crashing through the bushes. It is! I see his red and black cap!" Isabel jumped up and rushed off, while Alan picked up the spoon and plate that slipped to the soft turf unregarded by the hoydenish girl.

CHAPTER VII.

IN PERIL OF WATERS.

JUST in time for a game of *Hide-and-Seek*, Archie Damer appeared at The Bend, arriving on the scene as only a boy can—legs and arms flying.

"No tea, thank'ee," he shouted. "Nothing, thanks! I've had such a tuck in. I've been to Ford with father to the Quarter Sessions, and we lunched at the inn. Hi! You girls would have stared, I tell you. Then, since, we were at the pastry-cook's in the High Street. I'd just anything I liked to pick and choose. Lemonade? Oh, rather just! And look! Feel my pockets, all of you, if you like."

Archie, for the thin shaver that he was, certainly looked rather corpulent about the pockets.

"Yield and deliver! Your treasures or your life!" At sight of her young brother, Isabel sprang forward, and fled after the boy as he dodged her in and out of the shrubbery, hurling shouts of laughter at her as she toiled in vain, in his wake.

"Catch me, if you can, and you shall have all the chocolates!" he gasped jeeringly, as he and she dived, and doubled, and tore over the lawn, to the terror of Miss Flora, and the wild delight of Cherrie, and even of Alan Yorke.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear! What will happen? They will roll into the river, that will be the end of it! Oh, you bad maid, you will be your little brother's death! Where's the Boy? Can't you stop it, brother?" Wildly clutching the tails of the red dressing-gown, Miss Flora besought her brother to lift up his voice and stop the perilous racing and chasing so near the water's brink.

But the old penman was almost paralysed by the all-forgotten rush and roar of youth's fierce tide around him.

What did it all mean, this babel of noises and laughter, of shouts and pleadings? he was feebly asking himself, when a louder, more frantic cry pierced his stunned brain.

"Oh, Archie! He has slipped; he's in! Archie!" It was Isabel's voice thrilling with an agony of terror.

There was an instantaneous swaying forward of the little crowd, the Boy felt himself carried to the river's edge among the others, whose faces had greyed over in horror.

The green lawn sloped to the river, and down in the gurgling waters a little life was struggling



“ ‘HOLD UP, BOY! I’M COMING!’ CRIED ALAN YORKE.”

madly. And the onlookers remembered with ghastly dread the deep holes.

"Archie, hold up, boy! I'm coming!" cried Alan Yorke. His hat was off, and he was tearing his arms out of his coat-sleeves. His voice was so hoarse with fear that it carried no way, and it was doubtful if Archie could hear it. At that moment a swift, silent rush parted the frantic crowd in halves.

The next moment there was a great splash of a heavy body in the tumbling waters that were drawing the boy down into their fatal grip—down to the river-holes.

"She's mad! Pollie has gone in after him! Pollie will be drowned too!"

It was Cherrie's voice sounding shrill and high over the heads of the others, and Miss Flora slipped to her knees on the grass, half-swooning and hiding her eyes from the awful struggle going on so close to them.

The water was fairly deep at The Bend, and many a suggestion had been made from time to time as to a low brick wall or even a fence to give safety to the sloping lawn.

But country wits are ever slow in motion. What was good enough for the grandsires, is good enough for those who come after. There were no giddy heads, no unsteady patter of little feet, ready to stray into danger in The Bend household. So the peril went on, unheeded by generation after

generation. And now, all in a flash, came its retribution in the impending tragedy.

In the swirl made by the mad struggles of the two who were battling with death, the waters were getting a mastery over the weaker element of humanity.

A few seconds more would decide it. Pauline Skeffington, heavily built and weighted by clothes, was strong of arm, and she had got a grip of Archie's jacket-collar. But that was all. With a bull-dog tenacity she could hold on, but she could not help in any further way, as the agonised on-lookers could see from the bank where they stood or crouched helplessly.

"Hold on, my girl! Hold on for both your lives!" Alan Yorke's last shoe was kicked off. He wanted as little to carry in the coming struggle as was possible, for it was to be life—or death.

A chorus of muffled shrieks went up as Alan plunged after the pair.

Archie's white face, drawn and still, was upturned. He had ceased to struggle. But brave Pauline's strong hand was firmly twisted in his collar, and she had managed, by a superhuman effort, to draw the little, thin chap on his back, thinking he might float. But it was fresh water with no buoyancy. Only a few seconds would it be before he went down like a stone, dragging the dauntless girl after him. That was almost certain.

As Alan plunged in it was seen by the bystanders what had caused his delay. Round his arm at the shoulder was knotted the thick, red rope that had girdled the Boy's dressing-gown. It was the only thing in the shape of a rope at hand, and it caught Alan's eye. The other end was in the clutch of Isabel Damer's two hands.

There had been a word or two of command between the curate and herself, and Isabel was shrieking out for further aid on her part.

"Get Reuben, some of you,—get him to hold me from behind!"

But Reuben, the gardener at The Bend Cottage, was already at her back, his strong arms laced round her slender waist, and behind him a couple of maids lacing theirs round his.

Cherrie, seeing the motive, also flew, then the other girls, and thus a little queue was formed, in readiness for the final effort—when it came. But only God in heaven knew how the work of rescue would act. Would the three strugglers in the tumbling waters sink to the bottom?

And while the struggle, short and sharp, raged, the man of science and learning, whose writings were in the mouths of thousands, stood inert, incapable. To have rendered any practical help would have been simply impossible to himself, a master of theory only. No man better than he could have sat down, pen in hand, and worked out

the situation in words on paper. "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise."

Between himself and ignorant, childish Pauline there was this subtle difference, she did promptly, according to her feeble best, what he could so ably talk about doing.

For the first time in his life he had come face to face with the fact that the wisdom of man is foolishness in the eyes of God. But the swift knowledge did not rouse, it merely stunned him.

"Oh, brother!" Miss Flora opened her terrified eyes to say piteously. "Such a great writer as you, can't you do something to save the poor things from this death?"

The Boy trembled—and was silent.

But while the sword of his own utter helplessness pierced his heart, the struggle in the tumbling waters was coming to an end speedily.

There was work in the world for Archie Damer, and for brave Pauline Skeffington. They were wanted yet awhile longer. So for them the end was not yet. To be sucked under the slithering, dark, cold river, into its treacherous depths to terrible, choking death was not to be their lot, for "the Lord is mindful of His own."

Seeing the tenacity of Pauline's grip, Alan Yorke knew that it was for him to devote all his strength to rescuing the girl in whose tight hold Archie was.

"Clutch him hard!" He kept his mouth above water to shout as he seized her. The girl was a dead weight, but there was one great thing, she made no attempt to snatch at Alan to save herself. Had she done so she would have handicapped him, and all three would have gone down.

Second by second, Alan, with his double burden, could feel himself nearing the bank rather than the perilous midstream.

The thick, red rope was doing its guiding work admirably. To make it surer, Isabel had knotted it round her waist. Her young body was acting as a post; the human following behind her, which had by now increased in numbers, kept her riveted firmly to the bank, and it took all their strength to do it.

"And to think I worried the Boy, times over, to have the ridiculous length of that rope shortened! How blind we are!" wailed Miss Flora, half-hoping, half-despairing as she watched the struggle.

At length Alan, towing his burdens, touched the river bank, and strong, powerful arms were ready outstretched to snatch at him, for many helpers had now arrived.

All now depended on the tenacity of Alan's clutch on Pauline, and Pauline's on Archie.

Both loyal souls knew that, and the end was, that cautiously, breathlessly, the rescuers had all

three lying on the bank safely, and somebody was loosening the red rope from the waist of the unconscious Isabel, who had fainted, when there was no more need for her—womanlike.

The peril was over. Archie and Pauline, their faces upturned to the sky, opened their eyes, shut them feebly, then opened them again.

This time Archie's lips opened also. The mists of unconsciousness were lifted, life ebbed back again for Archie Damer.

"I want something—to eat!" The whispering murmur came weakly, hoarsely, but straight to the point, according to boy-nature. But nobody had the heart to smile.

"In a minute, Archie dear,—in a minute," whispered back Cherrie, whose arms were under his head. "Drink this first." She held something in a cup to his lips, and he swallowed it before he had the strength to splutter indignantly at the taste of the stimulant. But already it was doing its work; the tinge of red stealing into his face told that.

"And you, Mr. Yorke, dear. The water's pouring in streams off you. Dear lad, let us get you into the house, and into some of the Boy's clothing," gasped Miss Flora, fussing about.

Ten minutes later, Cherrie, who was nothing if not a human cork, stood giggling hysterically at Alan Yorke arrayed in the Boy's best black

suit, reserved for those high-days and holidays of the far-away past when he even was young and straight and tall.

"It's not such a bad fit; but look at the shape! And look at the green threadbare patches like islands on a shiny sea," she whispered to Isabel, whose lips still trembled uncontrollably from shock, and whose brilliant tints had died away into dark patches—as vivid human colouring has a way of doing in any strain of agony.

"And oh, oh!" Cherrie nudged her again, as Pauline in a long, scanty frilled gown of Miss Flora's came into the room her old, calm, stolid self, as if plunging into rivers to rescue one's fellow-creatures came all in the day's work for school-girls. "Do look at that splendid Pollie!" Then, with a rush that nearly upset everybody, Cherrie's arms were round the matter-of-fact Pauline's neck. "You're a dear, delightful brick, Pollie! You ought to have the Victoria Cross, or whatever instead they give girls and women for bravery. I'm dreadfully sorry I ever said you were 'common,' you and Cecy!"

Cherrie was actually crying hysterically as she squeezed the girl's throat.

"Did you ever say so?" asked Pauline calmly; and her eyes widened in meek surprise.

But Cherrie only cried the more violently, and hugged Pauline tighter.

"If you would only stamp on me, I'd lie down on the floor gladly and let you; or would you mind hitting me as hard as you can?" she sobbed out convulsively.

Instead, the unlovely, square-built girl in Miss Flora's scanty gown stooped forward and kissed Cherrie on her tear-wet cheek, and everybody in the room suddenly saw in a swift flash that Pauline Skeffington was beautiful within. The young soul that was fairer far than its clumsy casket of flesh had learned the Divine love—the teachings from the Master's lips: "Love your enemies . . . do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you. . . ."

And having learned the precious lesson, Pauline was eager to practise it in child-like obedience. Many a time since she and Cecy had come to Gardenfair, Pauline's eyes had brimmed in secret over her own conspicuous difference from the more shapely and better-favoured companions.

Pauline's heart was sensitive to a degree, and every careless slighting word about her own personality smote it like a blow, leaving its sting behind. She worshipped grace and beauty with an exaggerated fervour. Distinctly her own clumsiness and heavy nature made up the girl's cross.

And yet this unlovely, uncouth Pauline could do a royally gracious thing: she could forgive—in lavish fashion.

"Granny, Granny, she's a darling saint! She is the very 'bestest' girl of all the girls you have!" enthusiastically said Cherrie, when the Garden-fair party were all safe at home, and Granny listening agitatedly to the tale of the afternoon's disaster which had so nearly been a tragedy.

"And yet—and yet we called Pauline 'common,' did we not, Cherrie? So unlike the beautiful Isabel, so different from our well-born, well-bred selves, eh?" murmured Granny gently.

"Don't, Granny!" Cherrie hid her shamed eyes on Granny's lap. The girl did everything in gusts and she was stormily repentant over her unkind treatment of the meek Pollie.

"Well, well, dearie, God has shown you, as He showed St. Peter, that you 'should not call any man common or unclean.' It is His way to show us such truths in ■ fashion that has a lasting impression. In the days to come, when you are tempted to look with slighting eyes on those who may not be altogether fair to see outwardly, you will remember vividly enough that, when poor Archie Damer was sinking to his death, it was not my dainty twin-girlies, nor pretty Cecy Skeffington, nor even his sister, the handsome Isabel, who plunged, all regardless of self, into the dangerous river. It was none of my show-girls; it was plain, awkward Pauline, the clumsy school-girl whose gallantry stands alongside of the brave soldier of

the King who spikes a gun in the teeth of the enemy's rush and so yields up his life for his country. Ah, but it was a grand deed of poor Pauline, and we, each one of us, can but kneel and kiss her little hand!" Granny's eyes were dim, and Cherrie sobbed out loudly.

"Oh, if I could do something for or give something to Pollie!" cried Cherrie, in a muffled voice. "Something to please her awfully."

"You can do that much, anyhow," whispered Granny gravely. "You can give her a little *love*! I fancy that would be the fairest gift of any in Pauline's eyes."

"I will! I shall! Oh, I'll try to make up! And, for ever and ever, I'll look at Pollie inside, not outside!" vehemently said Cherrie.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHO DID IT?

JULY had fled, and August at its heels was likewise all told. The holiday weeks were over, and lesson work in full swing once again.

Varvara Popoff had spent her holidays necessarily at Gardenfair, so had the two Skeffingtons, whose parents had gone on a trip to America.

And in the absence of Lord and Lady Damer at the German baths, both Isabel and Archie had been housed for a few weeks with Mrs. Charteris.

Pleasureings and junketings had been the order of the day, Minchin and her lady being well-nigh worn off their legs. Never had any one of the six enjoyed a summer so lavishly; it had been a cup of joy brimming over to the six girl-hearts.

Even little Varvara's face had lost its worried, brooding look, and her tinkling laugh rang out with the best.

"But she will be just as unhappy as before, for I'm sorry to say Louisa has written to tell the child she is coming again to see her," observed

Mrs. Charteris anxiously, when the holidays were past.

The next day it so happened Loùscha made her appearance at Gardenfair. A tall, gaunt woman with sandy hair, pale eyes, and a straight, hard mouth; she was not an attractive object, except to Varvara, who flew into her arms with a joy that was pathetic.

"My mouse, have you missed me?" asked the Russian nurse, as she passionately kissed the small face upturned to hers to be caressed.

"Oh, but yes! Sorely, sorely, my loved Loùscha!" cried the child half-sobbingly.

Whatever was the news Loùscha brought, it excited little Varvara to frenzy.

"But he could not, he dared not, Loùscha!" She clenched her tiny hand, and the small pale face crimsoned from chin to brow.

"But he has—again and again! Ah, English Bill is an altered man now he has got me trapped in his own hateful land. He pretended he loved the ground I trod on. But now, alas! See you, my mouse!" The Russian woman pushed up her sleeve, showing an ugly black and blue bruise on her thin arm.

At sight of it Varvara paled. Then a passion of sobs shook her little slender form.

"Oh, my Loùscha! If I could kill English Bill I would!" she half shrieked. Calming down,

she went on disjointedly: "What can we do, Loùscha? How can we get you from his clutch?"

"There is but one way," Loùscha said moodily. Then, eyeing the little weeper with a sinister glance, she said slowly, meaningly: "If I but had money sufficient, dear heart of mine, I should free myself. Money would carry me back to our beloved Russia, where I should wait and work until my mouse was done with this schooling and was ready to come back to me. If I do not get money—and how can I?—he will go on beating and starving until your Loùscha is dead."

"Oh, my Loùscha, my loved one!" Varvara threw her arms round the Russian woman's neck. "Tell me, show me how to get money for you! Shall I ask the English lawyers who give me a silver sixpence every week for my own pocket?" innocently suggested the child.

"No, no!" quickly said Loùscha. "Think not of such a mad thing. Forget what I have said, my mouse. Unless—well, come close to my mouth, and I will speak into your little ear."

Then the two talked in muffled whispers, though their language would not have been understood by anybody under the roof of Gardenfair.

When evening came, and Loùscha had departed for London, there was the usual result of her visits. Varvara's little face was woe-begone, and her chatter all stilled.

"It is most vexatious, Minchin," said Mrs. Charteris. "All the good I do seems to be undone every time Louÿscha comes here. I cannot understand the mystery."

Minchin had just brought in the evening post, and the letters were lying in a heap on Granny's lap.

"Well, m'm," said Minchin thoughtfully, tapping her little letter-salver with her finger, "there's only one thing. Stop that Russian's visits here and the thing's done."

"Oh, I haven't the heart," Mrs. Charteris said, absently opening one after another of her letters. Then she exclaimed quickly as an enclosure fell out of one of them: "Oh, this is good! See, Minchin, three five-pound notes! The lawyer, Mr. Fry, has got some money at last from that old farmer who rented the field, don't you remember? The one who could never pay."

Minchin, who was the friend as well as the servant of Mrs. Charteris, nodded comprehendingly. Of course she remembered.

"'Twill come in terrible handy. I'm glad of it, ma'am, for the bills are getting high. You can't stint young mouths, and it's bewildering where to get the food sometimes," she observed grimly.

"Yes, poor Minchin, the heavy end does come on you, I'm afraid. Well, as you say, it's handy. I'm so pleased to get this money. But now we mustn't forget little Varvara. I think you must

bring her to me to comfort her before she goes to bed this evening."

"Here she is, ma'am, at the very door," said Minchin, as she opened it, discovering the little demure figure of Varvara on the mat, one tiny finger on her lip as if she had been listening.

"Come in, deary, come and lean your head on my shoulder, and we will talk together before it is bed-time," cried Granny.

Varvara crept forward with a strange abstraction in her face. That there was something weighing on the little mind was evident. The child was not herself.

Together the two remained alone, Varvara leaning her little self against Granny's shoulder, listening silently to the old lady's chit-chat manufactured to divert the child.

At last Granny rose up, and, gathering her letters together, went into the playroom where the other girls were as usual.

Half an hour's recreation before bed-time was the rule at Gardenfair, and the flaxen-haired young German governess, just arrived from the Fatherland, was playing dreamy music for them to-night.

"May I go to bed, madame?" said a timid little voice from under Granny's elbow presently.

"I'm very tired."

"Yes, dear, certainly. Minchin will see to you, if you are so tired." And Varvara slipped away

from the play-room unnoticed, unheeded by the rest.

There were six in the play-room that evening—for Isabel Damer was sleeping the night at Garden-fair—and the sixth was no other than Phœbe Brown in her neat, small French cap as snowy-white as her apron. A great, if gradual, change had come over the pupils' treatment of poor Phœbe, thanks to Granny's example and persuasion. They no longer scorned and flouted her.

Cherrie, who had learnt a life-lesson as to her fellow-creatures from Pauline Skeffington's signal act of bravery in saving Archie, was the first to propose that Phœbe should join the nightly games. Mrs. Charteris, greatly pleased at the suggestion, agreed, and it was the one thing to be looked forward to all day by Phœbe.

In the days of her bare, unlovely life in the slums, the only gleam of sunshine had been when a street-piano had struck up its tunes, and from the dusty pavements seemed to spring a crowd of pinafores and skippers and dancers, tirelessly delighted.

Phœbe loved the motion, because it was motion, and because of the music so dear to such natures as hers. With a wildly beating heart then, the little damsel joined in the play-room games every evening, and never did word or look of hers offend or jar upon the other girls.

To-night, Isabel Damer, who had a fine nature of

her own, for the first time asked Phœbe to be her partner. The handsome, graceful girl and the queer, old-fashioned London waif were skipping round the room delightedly, their arms round one another, a radiant delight born of the motion and the music in both young faces. Isabel's beautiful hair, none the worse for the explosion, was already curling over her head.

Mrs. Charteris smiled tenderly as she looked on at the innocent pastime. It was sweet to her that her teachings were bearing rich fruit.

"It will not hurt her. The rather it will sweeten her nature, which is a fine one, a gracious one, at bottom of all her wild harum-scarum pranks and mischief. Dear Isabel! Perhaps her mother and her father would not altogether much like it; but her Father in heaven will look down upon her docile, tractable lovableness with glad eyes. Of that we may be very sure. If in His almighty eyes the two young creatures stand equal, why not in ours likewise?" Sweet-natured, meek-hearted old Granny murmured contentedly under her breath. It was all so placid, so peaceful. And yet, had she but known it, a very sword hung over her head at the moment.

Berry and Cecy Skeffington, who had many points in common, such as pride and contempt for those whom they thought to be their inferiors, were whispering over Isabel's strange preference for

Phœbe that evening. For worlds, neither of them would have played with the poor girl.

The other pair were Cherrie and Pauline, fast becoming firm and true friends.

When nine struck, the piano was always shut as a hard and fast rule at Gardenfair.

"Oh, we're so sorry! Wish nine o'clock would never come," breathlessly cried Cherrie; and a like chorus came from the others, but it was only modest Phœbe's eyes that spoke, not her lips, her cordial assent.

Fräulein put away the music, and the girls crowded round Granny to chatter while the young German governess arranged the books for prayers in the dining-room adjacent.

"Come, come! Away with you! You're pressing me down; I can't breathe!" Granny rose and pushed the girls from her playfully as they clustered round her in bee-fashion. Then they all trooped to the dining-room, and a hush reigned in the house.

Prayers were over, and good-nights said. The troop of girls were unwillingly wending their way upstairs, when Granny's voice arrested them, and they halted wonderingly.

"Girls, dear, come back, all of you, and call Phœbe Brown!" There was a sharp edge to the usually gentle, controlled voice, and it startled the listeners instantaneously.

"Something the matter, Granny?" quickly ques-

tioned Cherrie, the first to return to the dining-room, with a skip and a bound.

"Yes." Mrs. Charteris stood with a disturbed face and trembling fingers turning over her letters at the table. "Ring, Cherrie, for Minchin, or rather, fetch her, and ask her to bring Sophia with her as well," she said quickly.

Sophia was the sturdy country damsel who did the heavy share of the housework, and who was never visible save at prayers, morning and evening.

"Are you all here?" demanded Granny, without looking up from the rapid search her shaking hands were making again and again through her letters.

"Yes, Gran, every one of us," said Berry, in astonished tones. What could be wrong?

"Every one but Varvara," put in Pauline, matter-of-fact always. "She has gone to bed, you know."

"I wish to say I have lost something within the last hour, and that something is money, three five-pound notes——"

"Ma'am! You don't say——" Minchin pushed forward in quick affright.

"I have lost,"—Mrs. Charteris lifted her hand for silence,—*"fifteen pounds which I received by this evening's post. The notes are not here. Have—have any one of you girls seen or lifted an envelope, with papers inside? If so, please say at once!"*

The girls all crowded up to the dining-table, and behind them, peering curiously at the spread of

letters on the table, was Phœbe Brown with the red and shining-cheeked Sophia.

Nobody spoke, for the alarm in Granny's face was infectious. The girls had never before seen her thus disturbed.

"You hear my question? I ask you, have any one of you girls picked up an envelope with slips of paper in it?"

"No!" There came a prompt chorus from the five school-girls.

"And you, Phœbe; you, Sophia?" Mrs. Charteris looked past the pupils at the young hand-maidens.

"No, m'm, I haven't!" firmly came Phœbe's denial, and she gazed steadily at her mistress with intent eyes.

"No, mem!" hoarsely asserted the ruddy Sophia, in a terror-struck voice.

There was a silence in the room.

Mrs. Charteris and Minchin looked fixedly at one another for a few seconds, their eyes saying many things understood only to each other.

Presently Minchin spoke aloud.

"I think, ma'am, if I may make bold to suggest to you, I should have a search on the spot now, in this very dining-room. One of the young ladies might chance to have picked up the envelope with her handkerchief or anything, and slipped it all unbeknown to herself into her pocket," she said quietly, but sternly.

"Oh, what fun! Do search me," Isabel Damer was beginning giddily, the novelty appealing to her.

"Hush!" said Granny, in a shocked voice. "I could not dream of such a thing in my house. When you go to your rooms, you will each of you examine your pockets and your garments, and of course the finder of the lost notes will bring them to me instantly. Now, good-night all!"

"Ma'am! You've made a serious mistake," began Minchin, as the girls trooped away, followed by Fräulein, who had listened intently to the whole incident, but making no comment upon it, possibly because her English was not always ready at hand, or possibly because she was indifferent to what was no concern of hers.

"I couldn't possibly have done what you suggested. I could not!" Granny's gentle, sweet face was carmine with agitated excitement at the mere thought of such an indignity.

"Then, ma'am, it won't surprise me if you never see them notes again," portentously said Minchin. "You know, and I know, the post brought them to you; I gave the letters into your own hands. You showed me the notes. I saw them with my own eyes. You have only been in two rooms since—this dining-room where you were sitting after supper, when I brought you the letters, and the play-room. The notes were lost in one of the two rooms. That's it all in a nut-shell."

Minchin, with the air of a K.C., narrowed the unpleasant incident down to the fact that the notes had disappeared in one or other of two rooms.

"The proper thing would have been to make sure they had not gone out of either the one or the other room," she said convincingly.

"Oh, but, Minchin, how could I? Consider the horrible affront to my dear girls!"

"There could be no affront except to them that are guilty, none to the innocent," said Minchin solemnly; and she looked round the room as though the walls could hear.

Mrs. Charteris shuddered at the ominous words "guilty" and "innocent."

"Then—then—," she gasped whisperingly, "you actually think the notes were——"

"Stolen! I do!" was the uncompromising retort. "I make no bones about saying so, either."

Granny sank into a chair, hiding her face in her hands. It was too horrible.

"But who could tell I received such a thing as money? Nobody knew that but yourself."

"That's true enough," calmly rejoined Minchin, as unconscious as was her mistress that the guns were thus turned upon herself. But, in fact, Minchin was so much part and parcel of the Charteris family that she had the feeling the

notes were as much hers as Granny's. And their loss was hers, likewise, in Minchin's opinion.

"But who among this little, simple household could *want* money so much as to *steal* it?" cried the agitated lady despairingly, "supposing you are right."

"We none of us knows the human heart. That's left for God Himself," slowly said Minchin. "But I must say it once again, dear mistress, you have made a mistake in letting the young ladies disperse away to their rooms without a search. If—and there's little doubt—a theft has been committed, then all under this roof, save and except you and me, ma'am, are under the suspicion of having committed the theft." There was a little silence in the room after the old serving-maid's stern *dictum*.

"Another thing, ma'am," Minchin went on, "if so be as you noticed the numbers of them three notes, we can do something by sending to Mr. Fry this very night to tell him. And then the notes can be stopped."

"But I did not! I never thought of doing such a thing. One so seldom fingers banknotes," said poor Mrs. Charteris, which was true enough in that lady's case. "Oh, Minchin, my dear soul, couldn't we hush it all up? I could not stand a scene!" she suddenly added.

"Hush up a theft!" Minchin, scandalised, threw

up her hands. "No, ma'am, that's what we couldn't never do! As it is, we must wait until the morning to see if the notes are brought to you. If not, then stronger measures must be used, that's all!"

As the stern old hand-maiden marched away, head erect, the heart of her mistress sank lower and lower. What horrible calamity was looming over the peaceful home of Gardenfair? Once again the old dread that maybe her own hands had dragged down retribution, made Mrs. Charteris quail.

If she had but been content to let her Father in heaven shape the future of her son's children!

Was all her attempted good work to be undone and shadowed by this black cloud that blotted the fair, placid sky?

CHAPTER IX.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

THE next morning everybody at Gardenfair got up with the sense of something disagreeable having happened. A dark cloud pressed down over the usually merry household. Ringing girl-voices were hushed to undertones, and girl-faces wore frightened looks as their owners gathered in the dining-room. Perhaps the most scared individual in the house was Phœbe Brown, the little damsel in the kitchen, who understood the calamity better than any one.

The new aspect of affairs was one all too familiar to the city-bred girl from her childhood.

A suddenly discovered theft, and a whole court or alley thrown into convulsed anxiety to hit upon the suspected thief, had been an every-day occurrence in the old life, "mad, bad, and sad" as it was. Over and over again had Phœbe been through such, and she had thought all such blackness and sorry turmoil was gone for ever, at least for herself! Already the past with its "sorrowful sighing" was fading.

A dull horror weighed down Phœbe's heart, and she went about with leaden steps.

"Looks as if she had done it herself!" Isabel stooped her head to breathe the words into the ear of her neighbour at the silent breakfast-table, as Phœbe came and went, waiting on the pupils.

That neighbour, who was Cherrie, made no response; she did not so much as lift her eyes to meet those of Isabel.

The fact was, the girls were shivering with fear of one another as of the possible culprit. The atmosphere was charged with lightning shafts of suspicion. Covert, veiled glances came and went, but for the most part a dreary silence reigned. Between each school-girl was a wall of doubt.

Fräulein at the foot of the table poured out coffee, looking and feeling as uncomfortable as Phœbe herself, especially when, now and again, she encountered the stern questioning gaze of Minchin, who always stood behind her lady's chair at meals. The hapless foreigner wished heartily she had never left the Fatherland to grope her dark way in this impossible English language, and its incomprehensible speaking.

When breakfast was scrambled through, miserably enough, Granny had a few grave words to say, after Sophia had been bidden to the dining-room to listen with the rest.

"I wish to say to you all here, that is, to every

inmate of Gardenfair, that I have not had the banknotes restored to me by the person who has possession of them!

"It is a most grievous thing to me; I am crushed under such a horrible calamity. But I have determined to press the painful matter to the end—for your sakes as well as mine. The money itself I need sorely. But what is far, far worse, the stain of suspicion you need as sorely to be removed from yourselves. It hurts me even to say this to you, and I have prayed all night that God would show us that some simple accident had happened to the notes, that we might find them to be mislaid only. But we are still in the dark. So I make this further appeal. Listen, one and all, attentively! You all know my desk-table in the play-room? The long, top drawer will be left unlocked until five o'clock this afternoon. The person who has my three banknotes will thus have the opportunity of secretly restoring them, by placing them, unseen by any one else, in the unlocked drawer. If this be done, no further steps will be taken; no questions asked; no suspicions incurred. The sorry matter will be buried, and, if we can, forgotten; it will at least never pass my lips in this life. If you understand this appeal, my dear girls, I ask you each to raise her right hand in token thereof."

A moment of silence; then a little forest of right hands went up in the air.

Slowly, contemplatively Granny's eyes ran over them, one by one.

"You are sure you understood my words, deary?" she asked, as her eyes ended on Varvara's little claw of an uplifted hand.

"Yes, madame, I understand," said the little Russian, in an awed, frightened voice.

Varvara, who had been the previous evening safe in her little white bed at the moment of discovery of the loss, had already had the theft volubly explained to her by each and every one of the other pupils. And, because of her absence, each school-girl had confided to the Russian her private suspicions.

"Very well, then. No more words will be said upon the subject until five o'clock, when, if the restoring of the notes has not taken place, there will be nothing but to communicate by this evening's post with Mr. Fry, who will set detectives to work on the matter." Granny's voice was strangled in her throat, and every young face at the table paled, while the red shine died out altogether of Sophia's hard, round cheeks as her rough hands clutched at the door for support.

Phœbe Brown alone gazed stolidly up the long room as if weighing every word her agitated mistress spoke. Every one else stared fixedly at the tablecloth, after furtively glancing at one another. Even Fräulein's blue eyes fell.

"Now, young ladies, come you," brusquely said the German governess, rising abruptly. She was weary of all this mystery, these dreary, frightened, downcast faces. It would be a relief to get to lessons.

But matters were little better in the schoolroom. The senses of the girls appeared to be congealed. Now and again a pair of questioning eyes would meet another pair equally investigating, and their owners would flush darkly at the encounter of mutual suspicion.

The morning wore on heavily, laggingly. But a break came at last, and freed the miserable pupils.

"Isabel, who do you think it was?" solemnly asked Cherrie, putting her arm round Isabel's waist, when the recreation quarter of an hour came.

"Well, I'll tell you," said Isabel, as she and Cherrie turned down a bye-path. School was now held indoors, for the early September air had an exhilarating edge. "I think myself it must have been Phœbe. I do, really and truly! You see, she was in the play-room last night with us when Mrs. Charteris and Varvara came in. That kind of people—Phœbe's kind—are always on the watch; did you never notice that? Their eyes are like gimlets, and they glue them on everybody and everything; nothing would escape them. She would peer at the letter at once, and perhaps the notes were sticking

out of the envelope—most likely. There's no one to beat a London waif for sharpness; she would know in an instant they meant money, though she has never, of course, touched such things as banknotes!"

"I thought as you do! But, then, how could she take them out of Granny's hands?" wondered Cherrie.

"Oh, easily! Perhaps she had a training in pick-pocketing, for all we know. It was Phœbe, I am certain!" convincingly said Isabel. She was always in the front rank of those who jump to conclusions; there was no medium course with her—you must be either innocent or guilty, according to her judgment.

"Who else could it be, you know?" she persisted, after a pause of silence, for Cherrie made no attempt to argue.

"It couldn't possibly be either of the Skeffingtons! What would *they* want with money? And if they did they've only got to write to their parents, who are simply gold-mines, they say. Then there's Varvara, she's too absurd! That leaves only Berry," Isabel laughed shortly. She, like Minchin, never dreamed of questioning herself or her own loyalty, nor that of Cherrie.

At the same moment, however, another pair of whisperers on the garden-path were busy with surmises also.

"I heard Isabel Damer myself say she meant

to have a new bicycle with a free wheel. She said she had got five pounds saved towards it, and meant to have a twenty-pound one, and she'd get the money by hook or by crook. She didn't care how, she said."

It was Cecy Skeffington who, with scared face, was whispering to Berry in another part of the old garden, and her shrewd, pale eyes looked back at Isabel and Cherrie.

"Then you think——" Berry, who was eagerly drinking in the suggestion, hesitated to finish the sentence. To suspect Isabel, the daring, frank, beautiful queen of Granny's girls, was too appalling.

"Well, you know, it was somebody, that's certain," Cecy observed justly. "Isabel wanted fifteen pounds for the new bicycle, I've told you that already. But if you say I told you so, Berry," Cecy's weakly pretty face grew vixenish, "well, I'll round on you somehow, sometime! Yes, it's my firm opinion that the person who took the notes is Isabel Damer herself! She's daring enough to pick any one's pocket, for that matter, but I don't say she did. What happened I think was this: The notes dropped on the carpet, and Isabel, whirling past with Phœbe Brown, saw them fall. She has the eye of a hawk. Out of mischief she picked them up, and then was afraid to confess, and she had been tempted to keep them for her new bicycle—just the sum she wanted! Oh, it's as

plain as daylight to me!" The speaker shook her narrow shoulders virtuously.

Yes, possibly it was, for Cecy was only too prone to think the worst, not the best, of her fellow-creatures, according to her own narrow nature.

"There's Fräulein," cautiously said Berry. "She's a foreigner, too," she added vindictively.

"Oh, I should think *they* are much the same as ourselves about taking things, and quite as honest, you know!"

Cecy Skeffington, for all her foolish, weak prettiness, had inherited a remnant of her practical parents' commonsense.

"I wonder if the notes are put back yet?" said Berry. "You see, here's the first chance to-day; the recreation quarter-of-an-hour anybody could run in and out of the play-room without being seen, to slip them into the drawer. Oh, I wonder! I've a mind to go and peep," she said, wildly curious.

"Go and peep!" half-shrieked Cecy. "Why, somebody may be watching, and *you* would be taken for the thief for ever and ever! Don't you see how dangerous for you?"

Berry turned white. It was true enough. Cecy was perfectly right. She might be taken for the very thief, she, Berry Charteris! What an escape, thanks to Cecy!

* * * *

In the wide, low-ceilinged kitchen, with its

windows blinking through a wall of ivy, Sophia and Phœbe were also making their surmises and guesses at the mystery.

"It's been stole in earnest, I s'pose," Sophia was saying gruffly, as she busily pared potatoes. "I means, a-purpose-like!"

"Of course, the money's bin stole a-purpose! Couldn't be a joke, no how!" rejoined Phœbe, who had been told off by Minchin to put the finishing touch to the milk puddings just made, by scraping what the girl persisted in calling "megnut" over them, for she was getting handy at a little cooking.

"I couldn't ha' done it! I should be frightened! Besides, it means prison," reflectively observed Sophia, prodding at the eyes of her potatoes. "Hear me, Phœbe, this yere business means the county-gaol," she added, nodding her bullet-looking head.

"It means breaking the sixth commandment, and that's getting into Satan's prison, and that's a lot worse than man's!" startingly observed Phœbe, in whose young heart the teaching of her gentle old mistress was beginning to take firm root. "There now," she broke off vexedly, "I've been and spoilt that last pudding with too much megnut! Comes of talking at one's work, trying to do two things at once, which I never could do it! Oh, deary me, I wish I hadn't! I don't see as 'twill matter. Nobody will ha' any heart to eat this day!"

Sophia shook her head forebodingly. Then she started convulsively.

"Listen, Phœbe! There's a knock! Happen it's the p'leeceman!"

"Well, and if so be as it is!" Phœbe shook off Sophia's frantic clutch, and went to open the door.

"Why, whatever! *You* back again? I thought you went back to London yesterday! Did you stop all night in Friday Street? And do you want to see little Miss Varvara again?"

The visitor nodded energetically in answer. It was Loûscha, the Russian nurse. She had lost the up-train the previous day, it appeared from her broken explanations.

She would just like one word with her "mouse," before leaving again for London, a word and a look.

"Oh, come in!" Phœbe's welcome was not a warm one. She and the Russian had never from the first liked each other.

Little Varvara who, having a headache, had remained indoors, was presently in the arms of the devoted nurse.

"Don't lose your train again to-day, my good Loûscha," Mrs. Charteris, having heard of the incident, came in half an hour later to say to the Russian nurse. "Why, my dear little girl, what is this? Why are you crying so bitterly?" She went on to exclaim.

Varvara turned away a tear-blistered face in silence, and laid it against her nurse's shoulder.

"The loved one has ill in the head—the ache-head, as you call it, madame," hastily explained Loûscha. "It would be best that she lies down and rests, if you will permit."

"Most certainly. I shall see to that myself. Now, hurry away, Loûscha! It's a long tramp to the station, and your husband's temper will be incensed by your absence, there's no doubt."

"Ha!" The Russian's pale eyes suddenly flashed. "His temper matters no more to me. I care no more now, for English Bill's words nor blows. I am free from to-day!"

"Well, well," Mrs. Charteris shrank from the disagreeable subject. "Best not linger, anyway. Take my advice."

When Loûscha had departed, Mrs. Charteris took the sobbing child upstairs to lie down. But Varvara's weeping redoubled. Her pulses were beating madly, and her headache had increased, which seemed strange enough.

"She seems to be rapidly getting into a high fever!" said Mrs. Charteris, in alarm.

"I'll just take her temperature, ma'am," suggested Minchin handily.

"Dear, dear, this is a pretty state of affairs!" She looked gravely down at the tiny figure tossing about on the bed. "Look at that!" she held the little

instrument to Mrs. Charteris. "There's no doubt as to the feverishness! If it don't subside, we'd best get the doctor. Seems to me we're stepping into a sea of troubles, one thing on top of another!"

"Have you looked, Minchin?" Mrs. Charteris turned to ask, and she pointed a finger downwards meaningly.

"In the drawer, ma'am? Yes, I have, and there's nothing—yet!" tersely said Minchin.

"And I don't believe there ever will be!"

"Well, it's not five o'clock; we must be patient! I pray we may find the notes, and end this sorrowful mystery."

CHAPTER X.

THE DISCOVERY.

IT was long past five o'clock, and long past the post time. Minchin herself had gone out with the letters, and was now returned.

"It's a duty you owe to the innocent, ma'am," Minchin was saying firmly. "We can't wait until Mr. Fry comes or sends. The notes may go out of the house in the meantime; who knows? Then, all your young ladies, as well as my two kitchen girls, will rest under the ban of suspicion, not to speak of that Fryline! But if you give your consent to the Friday Street policeman stepping in as it were promiscuous-like, he might put his finger on the culprit."

"Well, as you will, Minchin," at last unwillingly said Mrs. Charteris. "But this business will go fair to kill me, I fear. And perhaps it is to punish me that God sends it!"

Minchin glanced uneasily at her mistress.

"We have come through storm and stress together, ma'am, you and I, and we're not going to

fail while we've got Master Dick's girls with no one but us to lean on," she said, knowing just the spot where the whip might be applied.

"Quite right, Minchin! I shall do my duty while I can," came the prompt rejoinder.

But when the policeman arrived it was Minchin who had to lead the van, Mrs. Charteris, uncontrollably agitated, taking refuge with ailing Varvara upstairs.

"These are the young ladies, and that's the Fryline, and these others are my kitchen-girls." Minchin indicated the assembled group in the play-room, who gazed upon the tall, grim functionary with frightened eyes, as if he had been a rattle-snake at least.

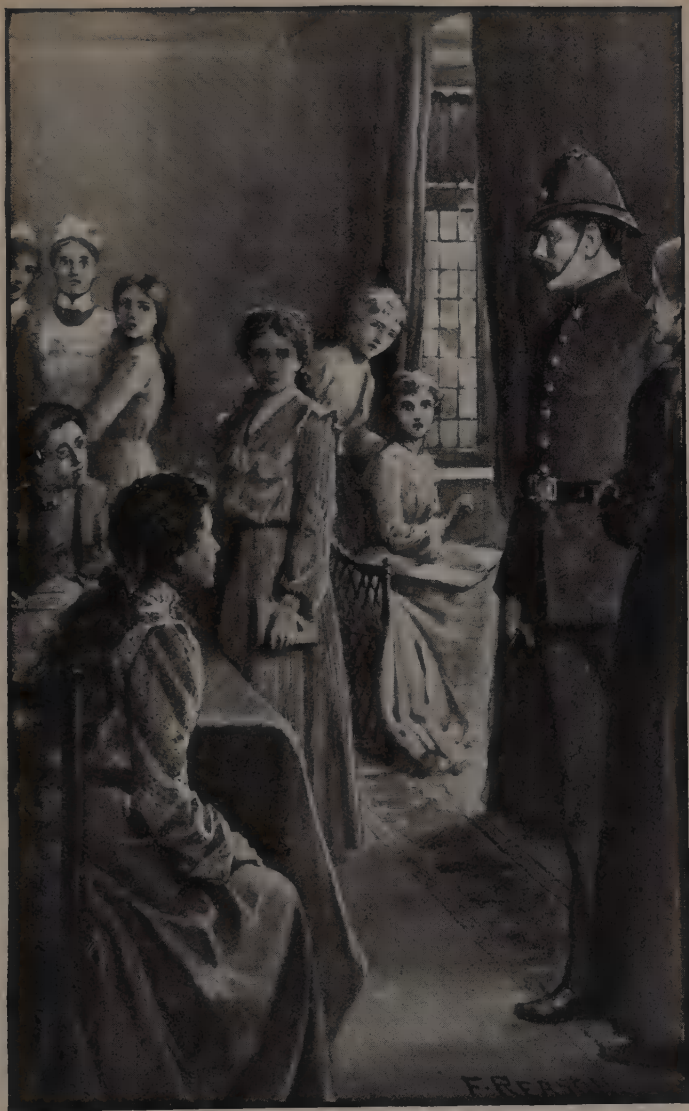
"Are these all the inmates of this house?" demanded the official in a suitably thunderous voice; and every girl instantly felt her knees trembling under her.

"Except the mistress herself, and a little pupil who lies ill upstairs."

"Name of the pupil lying ill upstairs,"—a pocket-book was produced.

"Oh, she's a foreigner, a mere Russian," irrelevantly said Minchin.

But that wouldn't do. Having called in the law, its representative felt bound to do something. So every individual name was entered formally; Cecy Skeffington and Berry propping each other



“ ‘ARE THESE ALL THE INMATES OF THIS HOUSE?’ DEMANDED
THE OFFICIAL.”



up, and both on the verge of hysterics, during the formality. When the entire household had been wrought up to the highest pitch of fright by his searching questions, the constable requested a private interview with the lady of the house.

"Do you suspect any one in particular?" Mrs. Charteris asked agitatedly of him.

The arm of the law admitted that he did; that, in short, he must request a further interview with a young girl of the name of Brown in the service of Mrs. Charteris. She had a queer look, he thought. That lady started as if stung. Phœbe, her special favourite, the girl with whom she felt she had made most way!

And yet she knew well that whoever proved the culprit, the sword would pierce her own heart. A thousand times she wished she had kept the theft a secret. What were three trumpery five-pound notes to the agony and shame that had come to Gardenfair?

While she was hesitating, Minchin had stolen away to return with terror-struck Phœbe, and the door was shut upon the four.

Later, when it opened again, and the constable departed, Mrs. Charteris was sobbing; Minchin was examining a corner of her apron, her face working suspiciously; but Phœbe, dry-eyed and stolid, stood unmoved.

"You heard what he said, Phœbe? You are to

go to your room now to be locked in for the night, and if you do not have the missing banknotes ready to deliver up to him when he comes in the morning, then—well, your mistress must give you in charge!" Minchin spoke sternly, deliberately. "You understand?"

"Yes, m'm, I does," respectfully said Phœbe; and she moved to the door calmly. As she turned the handle she looked across at her weeping mistress. "But I couldn't deliver them, no how, becous I never see them notes all my days," she added simply. Then she softly shut the door, and the two women gazed at one another miserably.

"She never, never did it," said one convincingly.

"If she didn't, somebody did," said the other; adding silently, "There's the Fryline, of course."

* * * * *

Next morning Gardenfair was early astir. Minchin, who had a good heart under her stern exterior, carried a cup of steaming coffee to the tiny cupboard of a room Phœbe had for her own on the ground floor. It had once been a tool-house, but with a rug on the boards and a clean little camp-bed, Phœbe had thought it perfect, because it was her very own.

"Drink this up, my girl, before we say a word!" Minchin, unlocking the door, pushed it open. But she spoke to empty air. There was no Phœbe in the room, only the strange, eerie sense of emptiness

a room can wear when its owner is we know not where.

The coffee-cup almost fell from Minchin's hands.

"My patience! She's gone!"

Yes, the little window stood open. It was just wide enough for a supple young body to squeeze through.

And—and—what was that? Fastened to the red pincushion Cherrie had made for Phœbe was a sheet of paper written upon.

Setting down the cup Minchin read it affrightedly.

"DEAR MISTRESS,—This comes hopping you are wel. I haven't got the notes, I never took they. So I get away, case you be vexed with I not having they.

"Your Bedient servant,

"FEEBY BROWN."

Once again Minchin read over the words before she took in their sense.

"She's run away—and taken the notes! The policeman was right; 'twas Phœbe!"

"Oh, Minchin, my poor Phœbe! We have driven her to this, and she innocent!" cried Mrs. Charteris, when the sheet of paper was in her hands.

"Innocent, ma'am! Phœbe Brown has taken the notes with her, as sure as my name's Minchin!"

"Never! I shall never believe it. We may

never find out who has taken them, but it was not poor Phœbe. And now, this is a fresh evil! What has the poor, maddened girl done with herself? She has rushed out into the world penniless, for, as you know, her little wages are put straight into the savings bank." Mrs. Charteris wrung her hands wildly.

"You forget the three notes, ma'am," grimly said Minchin. "You can't call her penniless!"

Matters from that moment had come to a grave climax at Gardenfair. No attempt to carry on the usual routine was made that day.

The girls huddled together in the play-room, talking in frightened whispers. Fräulein looked longingly at the closed piano. If these queer, excited foreigners were to make a holiday of their trouble, what a golden opportunity it would have been for herself to have a spell of her beloved music! But she did not venture, and besides, there was the little Varvara lying ill upstairs.

Varvara was indeed ill. The fever had increased instead of subsiding.

"We'd best get in the doctor," anxiously said Minchin. The air was charged with trouble, and the loyal old attendant feared the effect of it all upon her mistress.

"No, it's not brain fever. Certainly not! Brain fever takes weeks to incubate!"

Little Dr. Chance, who ruled the bodies of Friday

Street with his mind, was standing staring contemplatively down upon Varvara's restlessly tossing figure.

In his long years of village life, Dr. Chance had gathered no country rust. He was too mercurial, mentally as well as physically, for that. Therefore, as a rule, he managed to get the shortest cut to the source of most diseases.

"The long and short of it is, she has got something on her mind," he said, at last, abruptly.

"Oh, impossible, doctor!" exclaimed Mrs. Charteris, who watched him with eager anxiety. "Varvara is perfectly happy with us—that is, when her nurse keeps away. Oh, she has nothing on her mind, I assure you!"

"Then, ma'am, the best thing I can do is to pass the case on to you, as you seem to understand it better than I do," said Dr. Chance, with fierce politeness. Nothing enraged the little man more than to have his verdict on a patient questioned. His temper was in a flare at once.

But a glance at Granny's strained, wistful face dispelled his irritation. Perhaps he foresaw another patient unless he was careful.

"Tut, tut!" he went on, calming down; "never contradict your medical man! It doesn't pay, my dear lady! As for this girl, before the day's over you will know for yourself what the something on

her mind is. She will tell you herself in her delirium. At present the instinctive dread of giving herself away is restraining even her mutterings—you hear how inarticulate they are? It must be something very serious to have that force through the unconsciousness. Since last evening, you say? Well, the sooner her little tongue gives her brain relief from the pressure, the better for her! Some trifling fault she has committed, no doubt, and being super-sensitive, remorse and terror have brought on this condition. I'll send in something presently, and shall probably run in again this evening. By that time you will tell me the cause of all this."

Dr. Chance, with the air of being worked to death, was off in a flash, leaving Mrs. Charteris and her maid gazing feebly at each other.

"Can it possibly be from excitement over this miserable business?" faltered Mrs. Charteris.

"I expect it's got more to do with that Loûscha. Two days running that Russian was here, you remember, ma'am. She's been inflaming the poor dear's innocent mind with stories about her scamp of a husband's cruelties! But I must leave her with you, ma'am; I've got to keep an eye on the others," and Minchin bustled away.

In the quiet room Granny sat motionless beside the little white bed, brooding sadly over the peck of troubles that had come to Gardenfair. But

most of all, and, with shuddering forebodings, she thought of Phœbe, ignorant and penniless, wandering about the country, perhaps bent on destroying herself. Now and again the thought of the river forced itself upon Granny. She could hear the swish of the waters over *something* that lay like a stone beneath them. She could hear the measured tramp of men bringing home a burden.

"I shall go mad presently," she told herself aloud, jumping up.

The shrill edge of fear in her voice seemed to catch the ear of the muttering Varvara, who suddenly screamed out.

Then, sitting up in bed, with darkly flushed face, she began to rave in distinct sentences.

"Take it, Loùscha! It is money, real money! It will carry you all the way back to our beloved Russia! Your mouse got it for you. I took it, Loùscha, but it was no harm, none at all, for it is to do good, and set you free from cruel English Bill. Fifteen pounds, Loùscha; I heard them saying so, just as I was going into the room, and I thought of you! Take it! Take it!"

The distracted child's screams filled the room, and Minchin rushed upstairs, to find her mistress standing, like a stone image, listening with a great horror to the terrible revelations from the little white bed.

Varvara, like a human wheel, repeated her story

again and again in the same words, beginning it and ending it with the shrieking words, "Take it! Take it!"

Minchin, arrested, listened to the words as if shot, and a grey look came into her face as the sense of the confession reached her brain.

Here, then, raving out her own condemnation, was the—thief! Little gentle Varvara, distraught by her Russian nurse's stories of cruelties, had taken the envelope with the notes, probably while leaning against Granny's shoulder.

But over and above the awful horror of the discovery was faithful Minchin's paramount care for her mistress.

Slipping her arm round her lady's waist, and leading her to a chair, Minchin stood to think for a few seconds.

Mrs. Charteris must be got to her own room, and made to lie down. But Varvara could not possibly be left. And in all the household, who could be trusted to hear these ravings?

"Not Sophia, not the Fryline even! None of them—yes, there's one," she murmured.

Hurrying to the top of the stairs, Minchin rang a little handbell.

"I want Miss Pauline instantly," she called loudly.

"Miss Pauline," when the stolid, square-built girl stood before her inquiringly, "you jes' sit beside that bed, and keep your own counsel about

what you will hear. Never a word do you repeat!"

Pauline nodded. She did not understand the command beyond that it was a command, but she could at least obey, and she did.

"Now, mistress dear, we shall see to you, for it is time. Between them all, they're bidding fair to kill you!"

And truly Granny did want "seeing to." Strung up to the utmost pitch by haunting fears, and shame, and grief, she had quietly fainted away.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FOLDED LAMB.

THE day wore on and Varvara, thanks to Dr. Chance's sedative, calmed down considerably. She even slept fitfully, and Pauline, a born nurse in her staid way, kept watch beside her, while Minchin looked after her mistress.

The rest of the girls were telling each other that it was the most dreadful holiday any one ever had, when a new rush of excitement thrilled the household.

A telegraph boy from Ford arrived at Garden-fair with a wire. Everybody crowded to see the fateful missive.

"What if—if it's something about Phœbe?" Berry's teeth chattered in her head as she gazed fearfully at the yellow envelope.

"I'll take it up to Granny, anyway," briskly said Cherrie. "Better know the worst than be guessing at it," she added, sensibly enough.

The telegram, when opened, proved to be from Lawyer Fry, to say he had taken the numbers of the notes before sending them. They were, then,

waste-paper to the thief! A wave of triumph broke over Gardenfair.

"But, oh, what matters such worthless trash as money, when my poor girl Phœbe may be—God knows where!" moaned Granny. "Driven out from this roof by wicked, evil suspicions, the innocent child may have destroyed herself," she muttered.

"Granny!" Cherrie went chalk-white. "Surely God would prevent her doing *that*! But why do you call her innocent?"

Then Granny told her of the terrible discovery, and Cherrie presently crept downstairs to tell, with bated breath, the other girls that the thief had been found out, and that Louÿscha, the Russian nurse, would open the prison doors for herself when she presented the first of the notes she knew to be stolen.

The excitement was intensified. Isabel Damer, who had remained on at Gardenfair to share the risks, as she called it, was loudest in her passionate remorse for accusing the hapless Phœbe.

"I shall always feel I murdered her," she sobbed out. "To think I dared to say she was the thief! And she is as innocent as I! Oh, it is too horrible, too piteous! Poor, poor Phœbe, fatherless and motherless, to be driven out, perhaps to death! And we did it—I did it! God will punish me for it!" she wailed, and wept loudly.

"Oh, you were no worse than the rest of us, Isabel," gloomily said Cherrie, sitting down and planting her elbows on the table to gaze at nothing drearily. "We all looked down on her, because she was a poor girl. That was cruel enough, but we did her a frightful wrong, all of us but Granny, who wouldn't *believe* Phœbe was the thief, though we others *said* it actually. Even that horrid policeman!"

"I don't expect poor Phœbe would have minded what he thought. It was us all doubting her that she felt so bitterly," mournfully said Isabel. "Oh, if we could only see the poor dear thing, with her owl face, walk into this room and say, in her sing-song, 'Mistress bids me tell 'ee supper waites'! Don't you remember how we used to shout with laughter when she said it?"

All the girls suddenly burst out into loud weeping, simultaneously. It was too dreadful.

If they could only put back the clock to three days ago, when every one at Gardenfair was as gay as a lark! It was petrifying that the storm should have burst in such a sunny sky as their happy school life had been.

Was it always so that great afflictions were shot at people? they wondered vaguely.

"If we had been a miserable set, always whining and looking on the black side of things, all this would have come so natural. But we were so

light-hearted with our jokes, and our nick-names, and our fun—even Granny was," sobbed Cherrie wretchedly.

"If you please, young ladies, the curate have called—Mr. Yorke." Sophia's voice startled the unhappy girls.

"Where is Mr. Yorke?" Isabel alone stood up, and into her eyes, swelled with violent weeping, shot a dart of something like hope.

"I am here—waiting permission to enter," called out a pleasant voice, with such a sound of cheer in it that every girl lifted her head, and a bright flush swept Isabel's face.

"Oh, Mr. Yorke!" Cherrie dashed forward. "I was so cruel and so unkind to her! I despised her because she was poor and spoke her words all wrongly. And now, perhaps, she's dead, drowned in the river, so it will be me who will have to answer for it at the Judgment Day!" Cherrie was too frantic to keep back her terrors.

"Hush!" Alan Yorke looked half-shocked at the girl's outburst. "Come now," he said, "I want somebody to tell me calmly what all this distress is about." His eyes travelled instinctively to Isabel Damer who, with a new courage borrowed from her confidence in his presence, told as concisely as she could the events of the last few days.

Alan was aghast. He had heard nothing whatever of the theft and its dire results.

"And have you no clue to the whereabouts of this poor young thing?" he asked, seizing at once on the really vital point of the whole disaster—Phœbe's disappearance.

"There's her letter," Berry handed him the sheet of paper Phœbe left behind her.

"Poor little broken heart," muttered the young man, laying it down. "I'm off! I shan't leave a stone unturned until I hear something of her. Please say so to Mrs. Charteris, will you, Isabel?" Quite unconsciously he used her name, and the girl's colour deepened.

"He will find Phœbe—there's no fear!" She watched his flying figure, with a happy confidence that Alan Yorke could achieve most things.

"We ought to have told him before," said Cherrie hopefully; and she dried her tear-wet face.

"Granny didn't want to have the thing known out of the house, you see," observed Berry thoughtfully.

* * * * *

It was a cold, blustering, autumn day, with dull, lowering skies; the very leaves on the trees rustled shrilly in the blast, for their day was past; soon they would be swirling to earth.

Alan Yorke and his sharp, alert terrier, Corporal Trim, had together tramped the neighbourhood and outskirts of Friday Street. But they had failed to discover aught of the missing girl.

"She must have raced off in the direction of London, unless——" Alan shuddered as he glanced at the river. He knew what girls and boys of Phœbe's age are capable of lashing themselves up to the extent of doing, in their young despair.

The curate had got out his bicycle in order to go further afield, and about five miles off he encountered Archie Damer on the high road.

"Hi! Is that yourself, Mr. Yorke? What are you doing wheeling over the land, as the Yankees say? Thought you said it was a waste of time!" sang out the boy from the distance.

"What! Hunting for that girl Phœbe Brown from Gardenfair? Why, that is a lark! It's not ten minutes since I saw that queer figure-head of hers among the bracken up at the old quarry. I shouted 'Hi! Phœbe' as I rode past, and I noticed she suddenly threw her cape over her head, but she's a queer fish, so I went on; girls are queer, y' know!"

"The old quarry! My boy, are you *sure*?" gasped Alan. "What a dangerous place! There are some ugly holes which the bracken and brushwood hide. I must go!" He was on his wheel in a trice, and scorching behind him tore Archie, without permission.

"Now, where did you see her?" In a quarter of an hour the two pulled up at the old quarry.

"There," pointed Archie. "But let's leave the

machines, and I'll make straight tracks for the spot; you follow."

"No!" said the curate. "There are the holes. Before we knew where we were, you'd be up to the neck in one. You look after the bicycles, and I'll go myself." And Alan Yorke plunged into the wood.

Picking his way cautiously to the edge of the quarry his foot stumbled on some object under the bracken. It was a brown shoulder, the same colour as the dead fronds.

Stooping fearfully Alan saw a white cheek. Touching it he found, thankfully, that it was warm, not cold as he dreaded.

As he gently turned the face round, Phœbe's owl-like eyes stared up at him.

"I haven't got them—I never took them!" she panted in a weak, hoarse voice.

"Yes, yes, my dear soul," soothingly said Alan. "We've got them; at least they're all right. Now, drink this up, and then I want you to stand up." He pressed a little flask, which had travelled about with him all day for this express purpose, to the pallid, blue lips.

"Can you stand up?" presently he inquired gently.

"No, sir," came the weak answer. "'Tis my ankle. I felled."

Poor Phœbe had nearly stepped into a hole, and

in the wild efforts to save herself had twisted her ankle badly.

"Sprained it, I'm afraid," said Alan Yorke, examining the injured foot. "Yes, it's frightfully swelled. We must cut your boot off, that's all. But first——" His long shrill whistle summoned Archie, who joyfully plunged through the brush-wood.

"My hat!" he remarked, with staring eyes, as he regarded the prostrate Phœbe. "What's to do?"

"Well, this. Help me to get her out of this to the high road. Then I want you to pedal back as fast as you can. The Bend is the nearest house—ask Miss Unicume if we may take her there; then go to my place and ask my landlady to harness the old pony Jimmy to the tax-cart, and get somebody to drive over—no, not you, I've something else for you to do—and we must get the poor little soul back. Then go to Gardenfair, and—listen to what I say—ask for Mrs. Minchin before you say one word even to your sister. Say that Phœbe is safe, but her ankle is sprained."

All these directions were given while Alan Yorke and the boy carried Phœbe, moaning with pain, out of the wood.

It was a long hour to Alan as he sat by the roadside watching the hapless girl after he had, with difficulty, cut her boot off the tortured foot.

Phoebe was too exhausted by pain to give any explanation beyond her reiterated cry :

“ I hadn't they to d'liver, so I had to went ! ”

At last the tax-cart drew up, and the spent sufferer was conveyed back to The Bent.

“ Surely, surely ! Come in, and why not ? The Girl will nurse her back to health, poor belated soul ! ” The Boy stood in the porch, his scanty locks flying from under his skull cap, his red dressing-gown flapping in the wind.

“ Dear, dear ! Bring her in. Poor little wandering lamb, she will be safe folded with us. ” Little Miss Flora, pinched up by the bleak chills of the evening, pushed forward with outstretched arms of welcome.

Alan Yorke, with blurred eyes, bared his head to the pair, and a certain verse rose to his lips, but came no further : “ Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me ! ”

CHAPTER XII.

FOUND, BUT NOT LOST.

IT was three days later. Mrs. Charteris, looking strangely older, sat by the glowing wood fire, wrapped in a warm shawl. She was alone, for a visitor was expected, an important visitor in the person of Lawyer Fry, who had wired to make an appointed interview for that day.

From the play-room came gusts of girlish laughter, for the cloud over Gardenfair was lifting at last.

Upstairs, pale, frightened Varvara sat up in bed, struggling back to health slowly, under Minchin's pitiful care. And away at The Bend, the Boy and the Girl were tending the strayed lamb they had folded.

Yes, the cloud was lifting. Yet Granny's face wore a disturbed, unrestful look, and her fingers worked agitatedly as she waited for her visitor.

Presently came the opening and shutting of doors, a new peremptory voice, rapid questions, a heavy tread of footsteps, in fact the difference of

the advent of a man in an altogether feminine atmosphere.

"Mr. Fry, ma'am," announced Minchin; and Mrs. Charteris turned a white, scared face of alarm.

"Don't rise, my dear lady, pray don't!" The lawyer came fussily into the room. "A pretty business this has been, to be sure. Upon my word, things have come to a nice pass! But if you remember, I told you my opinion of this unwise fad of yours to take up a school. I never approved of it from the first. Better have pinched in a couple of rooms by yourself, and have let us get those girls of the Major's into the school for officers' daughters or something like that. Well, well," the lawyer seated himself, "let's get to business. The notes are traced, and the scamp who tried to pass off the first is comfortably lodged at the country's expense," he announced triumphantly, rubbing his hands.

"The scamp? Do you mean Loùscha?" faintly asked Mrs. Charteris.

"I mean the husband of this precious Loùscha. It was all a plant, my dear lady—I mean a planned thing. This Bill Bray got his Russian wife to play on that pupil of yours. Why, 'tis he who goes in fear of the wife, not the wife of him. But it is the man only we housed in gaol, not the wife, unhappily. I thought I'd run down and tell you, and also let you know that the farmer, who has

had a stroke of good luck, will take on those two fields, and that means a rental of thirty-five pounds. You'll be glad of that news?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Charteris absently.

The lawyer looked at her furtively.

"Ah," he said regretfully, "I'd almost give a year of my life to unearth that lost will, and set those two young granddaughters of yours at the head of Charteris Royal, and make them the two richest co-heiresses in the shires. It is a maddening thing, but what can we do more? Nothing! We'll each of us go down to our graves without ever seeing or hearing of that will. That's very certain!"

"I don't know about it's being so very certain," dully said Mrs. Charteris, staring at the spluttering, fizzing log fire. She was bracing herself for an effort.

"Oh, but it is. Quite certain," convincingly said Lawyer Fry. "There's not the ghost of a chance of that will ever being found!"

"What would you say if the will had never been lost?"

The startling question made Lawyer Fry fairly jump. Then he stared apprehensively. Mrs. Charteris was strangely unlike herself to-day. Perhaps the recent excitement had unhinged her reason.

"My dear lady——" he was beginning soothingly,

when Mrs. Charteris raised her hand to silence him.

Drawing an inlaid Indian box from the little table beside her, she tremblingly unlocked it, and lifted out a folded parchment.

"That," she said, with shaking lips, "is the last will and testament of my brother-in-law, Francis Charteris, of Charteris Royal. He gave it to me on his death-bed. And I, remembering the mad, reckless career of my boy, my poor, deluded, misled Dick, made a sudden resolve that I'd do my best to save his twin girlies from such a fate as their father's. Nobody knew I had the will. I concealed it, meaning to bring up Dick's daughters in ignorance of the wealth and its terrible temptations, in order to make good, sterling, self-reliant women of them before they should come to the knowledge of their inheritance. But I may have been wrong. I may have erred in wanting to shape their young lives thus. God could have done it without me. He has shown me that now. I have had a great shock, a strain that tells me I am not one to presume to be a wire-puller of fate. I might have died in that swoon I had the other day. So I now give into your custody the will I meant to keep for a few years!"

Lawyer Fry had turned from grey to purple, from purple to grey, as the thunderclap descended upon his stunned ears. For a few moments he

was inarticulate with rage as he stood examining the will.

"Madam," he foamed, "I'm not sure you are not liable to be prosecuted for this work!"

"Oh, no! I never said the will was lost. 'Twas you who said so," Mrs. Charteris observed calmly and innocently.

Then the storm burst. But presently the secretly overjoyed lawyer thought better of his frenzied outburst of rage. The will was in his hands. What did anything matter?

CHAPTER XIII.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

“O H, what a world it is of surprises!” Cherrie burst into the schoolroom one morning, her face aflame with news.

“Ach, leedle one, come you and study!” entreated the Fräulein plaintively.

“Study! Not I! We’re going to have a big holiday, and throw lesson books into the corner. Something has happened, girls! It is just like a fairy tale! Granny has told Berry and me this morning. The lawyer, Mr. Fry, said there must be no more secrets, he wouldn’t have it. So Granny told us. And she is crying—so is Berry. But I thought I’d come and tell you all.”

“Is it something more about that poor Phœbe Brown?” asked Pauline Skeffington sympathetically.

“No, oh no! Phœbe’s all right at The Bend. The Girl is petting her up as if she were a young queen. And even the Boy twiddles his thumbs over Phœbe, quite interested, y’ know!”

“Perhaps they’d like to adopt her; perhaps they

will do so," observed Cecy, whose imagination always had a practical colour.

"No fear! Granny thinks heaps of Phœbe, and Phœbe of Granny. Nothing would part the two, especially now."

"But what's your news, Cherrie? Do get on to your news!" impatiently said Isabel Damer, pushing away her books readily enough.

"Guess. I give you three guesses. Don't all shout at once, like rooks. You first, Fräulein, please," politely said Cherrie.

"Yes, well." The Fräulein looked pensively at her own ink-stained fingers. "But a wedding, is it—a union in this what you call Friday Town? The amiable-and-all-condescending pastor, Herr Yarke, marries himself, eh?" she said suggestively.

A ripple of chuckles went round at the young German's romantic suggestion. But one girl was startled and silent. Isabel's face whitened suddenly, and her large eyes wandered in affright from Fräulein's broad fair face to Cherrie's.

"As for Mr. Yorke's getting married, perhaps yes, and perhaps no," mischievously said Cherrie. "'Them as live longest will know most,' as Minchin crushingly says, when she doesn't want you to know something. But my news has got to do with *us*, not Mr. Yorke."

"Mrs. Charteris is going to take us all down to that seaside village where mother is so anxious

Archie should go to get over the shock of falling into the river!" eagerly said Isabel, whose bright colour was ebbing back again.

"Nothing of the sort. But give it up and I'll tell you. Granny is going to take us—Berry and me—to Charteris Royal! It is our home now, and when Berry and I are women-grown it will belong to us both, because of our father who died a soldier's death in the Sudan. We shall be quite rich, Berry and I," soberly said Cherrie. To be quite rich, and to live in grandeur somehow did not seem so madly desirable to Cherrie Charteris as it had done once. Her news meant many things that were sorrowful enough, and the girl's eyes travelled sadly round the faces of the fellow-pupils who were to drop out of the new life.

It had been such a happy, fascinating time at Gardenfair, the quaint home amid the quaint village-life of Friday Street. Now it was to come to an end, and a rush of hot tears blinded Cherrie for the moment.

"Going away from Gardenfair! Oh, Cherrie! Going away! Has it come to that? It's like an earthquake!" Isabel sprang up, and pushed back the new hair curling on her forehead. "And what about me?" she demanded. It was truly like an earthquake to Isabel; *her* happy world was toppling about her ears.

"And what about me and Pollie?" Cecy

Skeffington, in the shock of surprise, forgot to be stilted, and was her natural self. Gardenfair to be broken up! Cecy was furious with fate. But next to Isabel, the news told most on stolid Pauline.

To the astonishment of herself, as well as the other girls, Pauline burst into a passionate storm of tears.

"I don't want to go away from you, Cherrie,—from you and Mrs. Charteris. Nobody was ever so sweet to me before," she sobbed in unrestrained grief.

"Hilloa! Oh, I say, come! The waterworks turned on like this—what for? Wish I'd brought my mac and umbrella!"

It was Archie's voice, and reversing himself, he walked into the schoolroom on his hands, instead of his feet, by way of diverting the general grief perhaps.

"Oh, Archie, isn't it awful!" Isabel flew to her young brother, throwing her arms round his waving ankles, instead of his neck, which was out of her reach.

"What's up? Another robbery?" The question uprose from the floor in gurgling, muffled accents.

"Get right side up and listen, dear," mournfully said Isabel. "Gardenfair's come to an end, Archie!"

"What!" The boy instantly resumed the position in which nature intended him to walk through life. "Bust up, have you?" He regarded Cherrie

magisterially. "Has it to do with the robbery? Because if it has, I've got seventeen pounds eleven and sevenpence in the Savings Bank—I can show you my bank-book to prove it! I'll give the money like a shot to Mrs. Charteris, if that's all." And Archie meant what he said.

"Oh, that's not it." Cherrie went on to explain the marvellous news to the astonished boy.

"Well, but—what's all the weeping about?" he said at last, looking round the swelled faces, for even the soft-hearted Fräulein was sympathetically sobbing. "Because you girls are to be separated, d'you say? Well, and why not? Changes are lightsome. Look at me, now. Father has told me this morning that I am to go to Harrow in six months. Hear that, Jess? Well, and d'you suppose I burst out crying when he said so? Girls are just the queerest things that walk the earth, that's my opinion of them. I give them up!" Archie's head reared itself in lofty, manly disdain. "But, I say, look here," he went on, "besides my news about Harrow, I've got more to tell you, Jess. I'm to read with Yorke for six months! Well, what's there to colour up about? What a temper you've got! Father thought of persuading the Boy at The Bend to let me read with him. But the Boy said no, absolutely no. And I'm jolly glad he did! So he advised my father to put me instead with Yorke. The Boy

says he is the cleverest young chap in the Church—bound to be a bishop one day. So father has got Yorke to agree, and that's settled, but you don't see me moping round with half a dozen handkerchiefs at my eyes!" disgustedly said the boy. "I'm off again! I thought I'd ride over and let you have the news. Now, I'm going to tell Friday Street; it will wake them up to have me down among them every day at Yorke's rooms!" Archie grinned pleasantly as he jumped off the table where he had been sitting in a pool of ink from Fräulein's bottle, upset in Isabel's rush at her brother. He was promising himself some amiable diversions to vary the monotony of six months' grind.

"He's dripping with ink—but what does anything matter?" wailed Isabel, mournfully regarding the back view of Archie as he scorched gaily across the Green, skirting the pond, from which the indignant geese hissed their hysterical scoldings in his wake.

And to the rest of the girls of Gardenfair it really seemed as if nothing *did* matter.

"There's the Girl coming in the garden-gate," said Cherrie heavily. "I wonder if she has heard the dreadful news that we are all to part?"

But that Miss Flora had heard it, was written in the withered, little winter apple of a face that turned piteously from one to another of the fresh, young faces upturned to hers.

"Oh, my dears, my dears! And we thought you had come to grow up at Gardenfair like the flowers! And here you are to be uprooted before our eyes! And as the Boy says, it's like growing old in a day to lose your young voices and rippling laughter, your dancing, skipping footsteps, that made glad his heart and mine. Not that the Boy and I are old—by no means!"

"Miss Flora, dear, we shall never forget you nor the Boy either, no matter where we go in this world, never!"

It was Cherrie who descended on the Girl like a whirlwind, hugging and squeezing the spinster until there was little breath left in Miss Flora's spare body.

"Well away, my dear maid! We'll miss you sorely—sorely! But the spring is bound to move on—or the summer would never come to us, you see. And if there were no summer, there'd be no harvest, deary. 'Tis so, too, that we poor mortals ripen. There's youth, the spring-tide; then, summer's ripening of the fair fruit; after that, yes, after that,

O summer land of harvest,
O fields for ever white,
With souls that wear Christ's raiment,
With crowns of golden light."

A great hush fell on the schoolroom, and the girls looked with awed eyes at the rapt, old face

that in its turn was seeing afar off, "a great multitude which no man can number . . . standing before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands."

* ■ * * ■

"But you won't be quite altogether forlorn, Miss Flora, dear. There will be Isabel left, you know," Cherrie, who could not be long repressed, said cheerfully, presently.

"Isabel?" The Girl looked doubtfully across the room at the tall, straight girl.

"Yes, you'll have poor me, and I'm going to be as sweet to you as ever I can. I mean to turn over the new leaf everybody talks about." Isabel swooped down upon the alarmed little spinster.

"Dear heart!" Something in the warm, clasping arms told the Girl that it was a new Isabel, soft, womanly, and changed, whose warm, fresh lips were on her withered cheek. "The new leaf is already turned." And it was true.

* * * * ■

A couple of summers, a couple of winters have passed, and lo! it is summer again. And Friday Street is all agog with excitement, for news has just come that Gardenfair is to be opened up for a spell of six weeks. Granny and her girls are coming to spend a summer holiday in the quaint little home on the Green they love so well.

All the girls think that the stately, winsome

girl at Damer Court, who has just come back from her first London season, is more sweet and more lovable than when she set out for it.

For Isabel Damer is a far different girl from the one who gloried in startling and alarming the frightened, awed villagers.

She has grown to know how to wear the "priceless ornament of a meek and quiet spirit," as well as the other gems her doting father adorned her with for her first court.

"And it becomes her best of all," Alan Yorke whispers to himself; and a happy glow of secret hope makes his pleasant face still more attractive.

And the Skeffingtons are coming straight from Paris, where they say Cecy has taken on much French polish, while Pauline is more British and more delightfully true than ever.

For the rest, little Varvara and Phoebe Brown are coming from Charteris Royal, where they have been ever since Lawyer Fry got the will in his fingers. Day by day Varvara's nature is opening like a pure flower under Granny's loving, tender culture. She and every one else have forgotten the act she did in frightened, coerced ignorance of right and wrong, not from any inherent wickedness.

And the young co-heiresses of Charteris Royal? How fares it with them? Little fear of the two bright, brave, young spirits ever bringing anything but credit to the old name, the old stock, for

they have been purified through fire; their young eyes have been opened to life's dark side as well as its sunny one.

The happy summer gathering that is looming near will be an ideal one. The girl-hearts of Granny's crew are, one and all, bubbling with joy at the prospect of living over again in the old-world atmosphere of the Green the golden days of the past, which gleam none the less brightly by reason of the dark hours that shadowed them.

"We shall do everything over again; it will be putting back the clock!" jubilantly say Cherry and Beryl with one voice. But Granny shakes her silver curls a little sadly.

"That's a thing not given to mortals to do," she says. "The buds push on, and become roses, but the roses nevermore go back to be buds again."

"You mean that we girls are pushing on to become women, one of these days," sagely observes Cherrie, and Granny nods happily this time.

"Yes, women—pure and bright and good, happy wives and mothers, please God!"

There is a little breathless hush; the twin-sisters are silent, but they know Granny is weaving the life-romance of the wildest madcap among her girls—Isabel Damer.

And so the "pageant of summer" creeps on

apace, and there is an expectant stir on the Green.

"Makes one feel quite young again to think of Granny's girls and herself at Gardenfair," says the Boy at The Bend, with longing eyes at the goodly prospect.

"Yes, yes, but we're not old, brother! By no means old," says the Girl, craving also for the glad future that is coming.

THE END.

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